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"IN AN AGONY OF FEAR, CHARLES RAINFORTH DROPPED THE CASKET."

A Brave Girl; or, Sunshine at Last.

BY ALICE FLEMING.

CHAPTER I.

THE WILD, WHITE WOMAN.

MOONLIGHT and summer! Two circumstances which, blended together, induce this earth of ours with wonderful beauty.

In truth, this June evening is exquisite, and no wonder that one of the inmates of Lord Rainforth's mansion leans from her window to gaze out on the loveliness of the night.

It is a strange, weird loveliness, lent by the intensity of the moonlight and the lateness of the hour. Soft, rustling noises, whisperings in the gentle air, which belong so exclusively to night, disturb the silence which rests over the majestic dwelling, the wide-spreading woods, the long glades on which the fair watcher casts her sad, beautiful eyes.

Why is she sad, this youthful maiden of twenty summers? Why does she watch so late, while others sleep?

Let us not ask to know all her heart-sorrows on this first evening when we make her acquaintance. To-night it will be enough for us to learn that she, Hilda Seaford, who once called as fair a place as Rainforth House her home, now occupies the post of governess to Lord Rainforth's unruly younger children, and that she is surrounded by ungenial circumstances, which jar upon her gentle nature and her sense of right.

But this is not the paramount reason why to-night she sits communing with her own heart amid the moonlight and the silence. Ah, no! It is a weightier question she is debating—a question which fills her heart with pain, and now and then causes her tears to flow.

Oh! if those clear, pale stars which look down so unmovedly on her grief, her perplexity, could but whisper to her the answer that she needs!—if they could reveal to her the truth, her path in life would then be plainer and easier!

Is she loved, or is she not loved, by him to whom she has given her deepest affection? Sometimes (despite of all seeming to the contrary) she feels assured she is beloved, and then a radiance fills her life, and she breathes the enchanting air of hope (loveliest messenger sent to us poor mortals!). At other times the sober reality of fact steps in, and she asks herself how she dares to hope, how build her castles in the air.

In the midst of this doubt and debating, an incident occurs which thrusts on Hilda the necessity of deciding whether she hopes or fears the most. She, an orphan, alone in the world, and now penniless, is offered wealth, the love of an honorable man, honorably placed among his fellows.

That day's post has brought her his letter. If she will, she can turn her back henceforth on her life of toil and struggle, and resume the position from which her father's losses and his early death had thrust her; and it is an appalling thing for one so tenderly nurtured as Hilda had been to stand all alone in this unsympathizing world.

If she fails at any time to obtain a post as governess (a position quite new to her!) what is to stand between her and starvation? At the present moment twenty pounds is all Hilda Seaford's worldly wealth; in lieu of this she is entreated, in impassioned, earnest words, to accept the love of a man who adores her, who vows to study her slightest wish, and cherish her all his days.

Why does she hesitate, then? Why send tearful glances to the silent stars above, as if they could enlighten her?

As we have said, she loves another, who never yet has spoken to her one tender word.

But love is expressed in looks and tones as unmistakably as in actual speech; and Hilda, with a sigh expressive of relief, as if breathing in that sigh, "I will trust yet!" decided.

She would refuse the luxurious lot pressed on her acceptance—she would still hope, though there were fearful obstacles between her and happiness.

And, having decided, she hesitated no longer.

Rising from her vigil at the open window, she lighted a taper, and in a few sentences, full of the emotion she felt in penning them, made known to Sir Hector Dalston that she could not respond to the affection he offered her.

As the words were written, the clock over the stables struck two.

The sound recalled to Hilda how fast the peaceful night was wearing away—how soon would dawn the troubled day, with all its wearisome duties.

She would seek some repose to fit her for its trials; and Hilda was about to prepare for rest, when a plaintive sound smote her ear as if coming from the garden below.

She started, then went hurriedly to the open casement, and leaning out, gazed earnestly below. A scene of fairy-like enchantment met her view. She saw beds of glowing geraniums (their colored petals distinguishable even by this light), smooth lawns, noble trees, and, further off, water glittering where the moon's rays smote it, but nothing which could have uttered that soft, plaintive sound.

"Had it been fancy?" she asked herself.

And then once more the mournful sound came stealing on the night air.

"It is no fancy. What could it be?" thought the girl, trembling, and leaning again from the window.

All at once she had discovered, she believed

—felt sure, that she saw something moving in the shadow cast by an angle of the house—a pet dog, which was alternately caressed and neglected by the little Rainforths.

"It is poor Bijou. He has been shut out, and is frightened and miserable at being alone."

Hilda's next thought was, "I will let him in, poor little fellow!" Then, once more leaning from the window, she called, softly, "Bijou—Bijou, I am coming!"

It might have been a formidable undertaking at that hour to descend the staircases and traverse the long passages of this large mansion in order to admit the pet dog, for she would run the risk of alarming the household; but she could let Bijou in without going to any of the doors below, for her apartment led onto a veranda (guarded by double doors) opening onto a long flight of steps, which led to the gardens.

This room was on one side of the house, looking into peaceful gardens, beyond which lay the park. What was there to fear at any hour?

Hilda did not think of fear as she cautiously withdrew the bolts of the inner door, then of an outer one leading to the veranda, which the late Lord Rainforth had added to this wing of the house, in imitation of humbler residences abroad.

Her slippered feet made no sound as she gained the top of the stairway. A moment later she stood at the foot, calling, "Bijou—Bijou!" in a soft tone.

But though Hilda had felt sure the dog was there but a few seconds ago, though, too, it was his custom to run at her voice, to-night he did not obey her call.

"Bijou!" again called Hilda, pausing at the foot of the stair-way, while throwing one glance around her at the fairy-like scene of park, woodland, flowers, and stream, all bathed in the moonlight.

Still the little animal did not appear. Yet at this instant she fancied that she heard him reply to her call, giving his customary friendly response—not a bark, but a soft sound indicative of pleasure; but no Bijou ran to her feet.

Was he there or not? She could not return to her room leaving this uncertain, so, descending the last stair, she sped in the shadow along the dewy grass round the corner of the house whence Bijou's voice had seemed to proceed.

A little shiver assailed her as she did so—a tremor at her loneliness, for on turning the angle of the house she came into a very open space fronting the mansion, to which a broad road admitted all comers. Suppose any stranger should be here now?

The thought that Bijou would certainly bark loudly if such were the case (and, indeed, the other dogs in the stable yard as well) restored her courage, and she went forward into the bright moonlight.

Then all at once a great fear came over her; she forgot Bijou, forgot the other dogs, forgot everything in the dread which tied her for a few seconds, spellbound, to the spot on which she stood.

Quite suddenly she found herself in presence of a woman, who was standing erect and silent in the white light of the moon. This woman seemed white herself—white, wild, and of fearful aspect. Coming from out the deep shadow cast by a juniper bush, she confronted Hilda, transfixing the girl by her piercing look; yet she spoke not neither explaining her presence on that spot at that unwonted hour, nor demanding the reason of Hilda's being there.

Speechless, silent, awesome, the woman remained gazing at Hilda, under the full light of the summer moon.

Two, three seconds must have passed thus; then the fear which had enchained Miss Seaford broke out in an almost inarticulate cry, as she turned and fled to the stairway.

How did she find strength for ascending it? How did she traverse the long veranda, and regain the sheltering door which led to her own

apartment? Hilda could never tell, nor ever give adequate expression to what she experienced during those fearful moments, with one thought ringing in her brain: "Am I pursued?"

Several minutes elapsed before the scared girl could summon courage to go to her window, to cast a searching glance below. Was that woman there, lurking about the house, on the watch?

On the watch for what? Why was she there?

How strange, too, the manner in which she had confronted an inmate of the mansion! Her whole appearance was defiant, challenging the other's right to question her presence in Lord Rainforth's grounds. This woman might have remained in the shadow of the juniper bush, yet she had come voluntarily into sight.

And now another still more inexplicable fact presented itself to Hilda's bewildered mind. If Bijou was there in the gardens, why did he not bark? Hilda felt certain that she had seen him certain that she had distinguished the pet creature's friendly greeting; yet the dog had held back, not rushing joyously forward, as was its custom, to meet Hilda.

Then, again, the dogs kennelled in the stable-yard had kept silent. Through the stillness Hilda had heard the rattling of their chains; but not one of them had barked.

All this reasoning shot rapidly as an arrow through the young lady's mind, while she was still trembling where she had sunk down on regaining her room.

But now what ought she to do? Rouse the household? That was her first impulse? She had even risen to do so; but a second reflection restrained her. Lady Rainforth was fond of accounting herself an invalid (which never prevented her participation in all manner of fashionable gayeties). Lord Rainforth had once declared, in Miss Seaford's hearing, that he would not thank any one for rousing him up from sleep; nothing short of burglars in the house would justify it.

Hilda had only seen a solitary woman, of wild and strange appearance, it is true, but still, only a woman.

She might have been some poor, wandering, half-witted creature, who had been tempted to enter Lord Rainforth's grounds, lured on by the brilliant moonlight.

Half-past two chimed out. The summer dawn would show itself in less than another couple of hours; till then Hilda resolved to watch and wait, but not to rouse the sleeping inmates of Rainforth House.

Having formed which determination, she softly closed her window, not without another searching glance below. There, gamboling about among the flowers, was Bijou—unmistakably, it was Bijou, who had not come at Hilda's call, who had not given one threatening bark at the presence of the stranger.

CHAPTER II.

LORD RAINFORTH'S OPINION.

A FEW more hours had rolled by, giving place to all the glory of a summer morning.

Lord Rainforth's extensive demesne was now bathed in noon sunlight. Banished were those dim shadows cast by the moon, which had seemed to Hilda so gloomy and mysterious.

Hours since she had sent a message by Helen (one of her pupils) to Lady Rainforth, to intimate to that lady that she had been disturbed by an unusual occurrence during the night, and thought it right to apprise her ladyship of it without delay.

Lady Rainforth happened to be sleeping after a dinner party, so sent word to Helen by Miss Seaford to name the matter to Lord Rainforth when she went down to the library for prayers. (For in this stiffly regulated household all outward forms and ceremonies were strictly observed.)

Thus, when the long array of servants had filed out of the room, Lord Rainforth having rapidly read a few of the collects, Miss Seaford (who rarely addressed his lordship) ap-

proached him, saying that Lady Rainforth had begged her to mention to him something which had occurred last night.

"Run away, children," said his lordship. "Now, Miss Seaford, what is it?"

Hilda, in brief words, told her startling story.

"A woman in the grounds! Close to the entrance! Really, really, Miss Seaford, I don't see what any woman could be doing there!"

"It is because she could have no business here that I have named the occurrence at once," replied Hilda.

At this moment Bijou ran into the room, joyous, overflowing with fun. He gave a spring and leapt into Hilda's arms.

"But you see, Miss Seaford, how that dog behaves this morning! If he had been close by you last night he would have obeyed your call. Nor did the other dogs give any sign of restlessness at the intrusion of that stranger. You must pardon me for expressing a decided opinion on the subject, but I think you were mistaken altogether!"

"Your lordship believes, then, that I imagined the appearance of that woman?" cried Hilda.

"Well, yes. Moonlight is very deceptive. The hour was late; you were naturally ready to be startled at any trifling circumstance, or by merely the changing light cast by the moon. Already your eyesight had played you false with regard to Bijou, for, of course, he was not there, or he must have run to you at your call. Some unexplained noise outside the house made you suppose the dog was near; you pursued him, and—turning, I presume, on a sudden into the full glare of the moonlight—the weird form of a woman appeared to rise up before you. Naturally you fled—by your own account you were struck with fear—without further pause. You must pardon me, Miss Seaford, for the opinion I have ventured to give so plainly."

Hilda was amazed.

"I was not mistaken, my lord. But I do not seek to force my conviction upon you; I only desired that you and Lady Rainforth should be made acquainted with what had occurred. Certainly some stranger was in your grounds last night; but I will not detain your lordship any longer."

"But allow me to detain you one moment, Miss Seaford. Of course Lady Rainforth and myself are much obliged to you for mentioning anything which you think it right we should know; and I regret to have to add that I deem it extremely imprudent of you to have acted as you did last night. Suppose for a moment there had been any one in the grounds, with a design to rob the house, you must see that your descent into the gardens would have made their way easy. Let me request you, then, to leave Bijou to his fate for the future."

"Certainly, my lord, since it is your wish," replied Hilda. "But again let me assure you that some woman was loitering near the entrance of this house at two o'clock this morning."

"Such is your belief, of course. I differ from you, and am sure that Lady Rainforth will agree with me in wishing this strange story not to get afloat. Servants and children are so fond of the marvelous—so easily frightened! Thus I will request you not again to mention the affair to any one."

"Very well, my lord."

The conference was at an end. Hilda, as she closed the door of the library, silently congratulated herself that she had not roused any one in the house last night. Lady Rainforth would have bemoaned her broken rest for the next twelvemonth; while Lord Rainforth would have ridiculed her fears, and perhaps openly have expressed his displeasure.

On her way up-stairs to the school-room, still with Bijou (the cause of her perplexity) in her arms, she met a young man descending the staircase. He was of handsome, manly bearing, and his dark visage flushed with emotion

as he suddenly encountered the lovely girl with the pet animal in her arms.

"Bijou is honored!" said he, smiling while extending his hand to Hilda, and retaining hers quite too long for an ordinary morning greeting.

Hilda flushed a little also, as she let her hand lay passively in the warm clasp of the young man, but she answered, carelessly, "Bijou is a naughty fellow! He does not deserve petting this morning. I do not know where he was last night, and he would not come when I called him." (So much she might say, in order to find out where Bijou had passed his hours).

"Lady Rainforth declares he must have been out all night," exclaimed the young man. "She has just sent her maid, Parsons, to look for him. It seems she supposed he was asleep on the sofa of her dressing-room as usual; but when morning dawned, he was not to be found."

"Did I not say you were naughty, Bijou?" replied Hilda, addressing the favorite, and not betraying what she felt at the young man's answer.

And then she would have passed on, but he detained her.

"Miss Seaford," said he—(and how full was his tone of a concealed affection for her to whom he was speaking!)—"won't you wish me some good fortune in the coming years? For this is my birthday. Besides, this very year, and in this very month, my fate will be decided."

"Indeed!" said Hilda, feeling more than she betrayed. "I wish you all manner of joy and good fortune, Mr. Fraser."

"Wish me the thing I most prize; and, for a secondary bit of good fortune, that I may be rich instead of poor this time next year."

"If wishes will benefit you, both your desires shall be gratified, Mr. Fraser," returned Hilda, lightly.

Her tone was light, but the blush on her cheek deepened; for he had thrown a good deal of meaning into that sentence in which he had asked her to wish for him that which he most prized.

What was that? Was it her love?

Many half-breathed sentences, gently uttered words full of meaning, looks and tones concealed from others, made the young girl ask herself this question.

His love would be life, joy, glory, supremest bliss to Hilda! But she was penniless now; a governess in the house where Sidney Fraser had grown up as a ward of Lord Rainforth's.

"Ten thousand warmest thanks!" cried the young man. "Ah, you little dream how one wish of yours will benefit me—how it will help to soothe the long suspense which draws to an end now! How cruel it was of my godfather to leave such a will! You have heard what it was, Miss Seaford? He left me four hundred and fifty pounds a year, which he designed to educate me; and he left, too, a secret codicil which is not to be opened till I have attained my twenty-third birthday. Then, and then only, shall I know whether this provision ceases, and leaves me a beggar, or whether I inherit wealth which has been accumulating all this time. But the old man was so eccentric, and did so many unlooked-for things, that he may have burdened any legacy left to me with some strange provision, which I should find it impossible to fulfill."

"Ob, surely," said Hilda, "no one would withdraw an income granted for so many years."

"My godfather was capable of it, and a great deal more," replied Sidney. "Indeed, many sentences in the will read at his funeral point to such a conclusion. There were all sorts of half-expressed convictions that young men should stand on their own merits, and learn their own worth."

"It would be shameful to leave you without that to which his own decision has accustomed you, Mr. Fraser."

"Yes, truly. For everything I was to do was parceled out for me—school, Eton, Ox-

ford, and then the year of waiting. Waiting for what? A fortune or beggary? Any deviation from the rules he had laid down was to be followed by total loss of income, total loss of any hope of succeeding to my uncle's wealth; for he was my uncle as well as godfather."

Sydney Fraser had said all this in a low voice, as he stood by Hilda's side, gazing at her. Why did he tell her all this, if he and she were to be nothing to each other?

She was his equal in birth, though she had no eccentric wealthy relative to provide for her when her father died, broken-hearted at the loss of his property in a speculation which he had believed would double it.

If he loved her, if he stretched out his hands to offer her a golden future, why might she not take the gift? She could joyfully give him her whole heart in return for his affection; while her well-born relatives would speedily remember her existence, crowd round her, and open their doors to her again if they heard of her engagement to a ward of Lord Rainforth's.

The distant slamming of a door—the school-room door, as Hilda well recognized—made her start.

"You must go!" said Sydney, once more clasping her fingers in his. "Adieu, then, till we meet again!"

"We've been waiting ever so long!" exclaimed the children, in chorus, as she entered the school-room. "Whatever were you doing, Miss Seaford?"

"Never mind; I was detained," replied she, seating herself at the table, where many books were heaped together.

Fortunately for Hilda the children's whole attention was fixed on Bijou.

"Why, there is Bijou!" cried they. "We'll run and tell mamma and the servants. Do you know, Miss Seaford, that poor Bijou was shut out all last night? Little Love and he are accustomed to sleep on mamma's sofa."

"How do you know that he was out; you cannot be sure?" asked Hilda, her thoughts traveling back to last night's adventure.

"Can't we be sure, though?" cried Roger, a troublesome boy of seven years old. "Phillips, papa's man, was down first this morning, and he let Bijou in; he told me so. Bijou was whining to come in, and Phillips opened the door before any of the housemaids got downstairs."

Here was confirmation of one part of her story. The dog had been there. Why had he not barked at that wild woman who had emerged from the deep gloom of the juniper bush, silently to confront and affright her? But she could not ask this question aloud; Lord Rainforth had bound her to silence.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER ADVENTURE.

THE day went by as most of Hilda's days passed now, since a year ago, when she had undertaken the post of governess to Lady Rainforth's children.

For her there was no longer a life of easy enjoyment, a maid to dress her to appear in society, a groom to bring round her horse, long delicious summer evenings at home, a home of which she had been for two short years the envied and youthful mistress; but instead thereof, the monotonous task of teaching unwilling children, and who habitually took up the tone of disregarding their governess.

Lord and Lady Rainforth treated her, indeed, with outward courtesy, but kept her at an immense distance; but Hilda had learned in her great reverse of fortune to be thankful for much which, two years ago, she would have thought beneath her consideration.

But now the shelter of another's roof, distasteful work (because unaccustomed work), a word of courtesy now and then, fell to Hilda's lot; she who once had the world at her feet.

Into the midst of this unloving life Sydney Fraser broke like a blaze of brightest sunlight. He came, and with him joy to Hilda.

Long had she sought to quench this joy, to tell herself that she must be calm, that she must hope for nothing; but her heart *would* thrill wildly when *he* approached—hope *would* thrust itself forward where it was least expected.

By the time Hilda had been a year at Rainforth House, during which she had seen Sydney Fraser on many different occasions, Hilda's heart belonged to him; he had insensibly stolen her young affection.

She acknowledged this to herself as, the evening succeeding her encounter with the wild, white-looking woman, she again sat by her window in the hush of night.

Could she sleep with the warm night-air fanning her brow and the warm hope at her heart that Sydney loved her?

With the same radiance as that of yesterday the moon shone down upon the gardens.

Bijou was not capering about to-night, and only the half-hour after midnight had struck, else all recalled the scene of nearly twenty-four hours ago.

Hilda leaned from her window, thinking of Sydney. As her heart traveled in this direction, and she dreamily sought the distance over which streamed the magical light of the moon, she became conscious of a form moving in the space intervening between herself and the boundary of the park, and as instantly her looks fastened upon it; a dark, gliding form, as different as possible from the white, startling figure of silence which had confronted her in the shape of the unknown woman.

Passing from shrub to shrub, never leaving the shadow save where it could not be avoided, this slinking image stole along, making a sort of circuit of one side of the grounds, until it vanished from view.

But Hilda had watched it—was it him or her?—who could tell?—for full ten minutes, and was positively sure that her senses had not deceived her.

At one time this slinking figure had not been many yards from the house. Surely the dogs ought to have noted and resented the presence of an intruder; but no deep-toned bark shook the quiet of the night.

"After all, I cannot be certain that this incident has anything to do with last night's occurrence. But it is very uncomfortable to feel that strangers are prowling about while one sleeps."

She was about to close the window as she thought thus, when, behold! the gliding form once more stole on her view, making for the house, or for the high road which ran near the back entrance.

From tree to shrub, until it stood for just one moment in the full glare of the resplendent moonlight, then vanished in the dark shadow cast by an angle of boundary wall—then it was gone.

Who or what was it?

Long she watched, tossed and troubled, and falling at length into an uneasy sleep, did not awake till long after the school-room maid had come as usual to her chamber in the morning.

"We've been waiting ten minutes, Miss Seaford!" cried Helen, a pert girl, Lady Rainforth's third child.

"So I see, Helen," replied Hilda, quietly.

Unlike most children, they were on the lookout to find fault, and were delighted if they could tell their august mother "that Miss Seaford had been late for breakfast."

Thus Hilda was not surprised when Lady Rainforth, who chanced to be up in time for breakfast, and who honored the family circle with her presence, turned to her with an injured and haughty air as soon as the servants had begun to file out of the room.

"I wish I could find that you attached more value to punctuality, Miss Seaford. I hear that breakfast waited ten minutes in the school-room this morning? How is that?"

"I was again kept awake to a late hour, Lady Rainforth," replied Hilda.

"Indeed! Go up-stairs, my dears. Miss Seaford will soon follow you."

"To what do you allude?" asked her ladyship, when the children had reluctantly left the room, and Lord Rainforth had drawn near to listen.

Fain, too, would Sydney have joined the two ladies; but Lady Rainforth made him a sign that she desired his absence.

"Last night I saw some dark figure slinking about the grounds," replied Hilda, "creeping along in the shade, till it completed half the circuit of the flower-garden; then it vanished, returning in the same stealthy fashion as it had gone. It was not the woman who startled me yesterday—that was all I could be sure of. Oh, Lady Rainforth! who could sleep with the idea that some one, perhaps with evil design, was lurking close to the house? Thus it happened that, awake so long, I fell into deep and uneasy sleep toward morning."

"Really, Miss Seaford, you must learn to be firmer—to exercise common sense—or I don't know how you will go through life. Probably you *did* see a figure stroll across the flower-garden by moonlight; but there is in that nothing alarming whatever. Some curious and belated villager took into his head to enter the grounds, I presume; or it might even have been one of the gardeners or stablemen. They are up early and late sometimes, I am told. Now, let me counsel you to go early to bed yourself in future, and you will not be assailed with these idle fancies."

Hilda felt hurt.

She replied briefly, "that at all events she would not again trouble Lady Rainforth with an account of midnight intruders, even though she might see any;" and then she retired to her usual work.

Just before luncheon, Helen came running into the school-room, in great excitement.

"Only think, Miss Seaford, mamma has just told me such news! I am to be bride-maid, this day fortnight, to a beautiful cousin of ours—I and Julia, too! Mamma would not tell us sooner, because she knew we should think of nothing else. But now the dresses must be tried on, so they were obliged to let us know."

Here Julia, the elder girl, who was fifteen, broke in, pouring forth a torrent of words about the approaching wedding.

"Our cousin, Lady Emily Landmore, is so rich and so pretty! She was to have been married from uncle Rainforth's house. He is her principal guardian, for she is an orphan, you know; but unfortunately, or rather fortunately for us, scarlet fever has broken out at the Castle, and so Lady Emily will be married from this house. She will arrive in a few days. We shall see all her presents; we shall be at the breakfast. I am so glad!"

Nothing was talked of during luncheon but this approaching wedding. Lord Rainforth's eldest son, a spendthrift, who seldom favored home with his presence, save when he wanted more money, would certainly grace, or disgrace, this bridal, and had already written to say he might be expected that day week. A postscript at the end of the letter gave much satisfaction both to Lord and Lady Rainforth, although neither of them thought it necessary to proclaim it. The short sentence which had caused their content ran as follows:—

"You will be pleased to hear that I have got along very well this year, and shall not want to draw on my father on account of Emmy's wedding; though, of course, I hope to figure as well as any one at the nuptials, and shall give Emmy a suitable wedding gift."

Lady Rainforth smiled as she handed the letter to her husband.

Lord Rainforth remarked, with a sigh, "that he only hoped this unusual supply of ready money didn't mean that Charlie had been borrowing."

Of course, Hilda was not cognizant of this little episode, nor were the children, as they were on their way up-stairs to the school-room after luncheon.

It was a trying afternoon to get through, the children interrupting their work every five

minutes to utter some hope or wish about Lady Emily's wedding.

"You'll see her married, Miss Seaford—at least, you can if you like. The school children and ever so many of the villagers will be there. But you won't be at the breakfast, you know, for I heard mamma say so this morning; so you won't want a new dress. You could not afford one, though, could you? Governesses are always poor, ar'n't they?"

This polite speech was from Roger.

"Little boy, hold your tongue. It is not for you to make such remarks," said Hilda, who felt it due to herself to check the impertinence always ready to break forth from her pupils' lips.

Roger colored, and wriggled on his seat, when, happily for all parties, the clock struck the quarter to five; the school-room maid, Jane, could be heard bringing in tea; the children jumped up with alacrity, to put away books and wash their hands, and Hilda breathed a soft sigh of relief.

"Here's a letter for you, miss," said Jane, approaching Miss Seaford. "It came by the afternoon post."

"Thank you, Jane," replied Hilda, quietly, little heeding what the letter might contain.

CHAPTER IV.

TOMMY TUTT.

"Do be quick with your tea, Miss Seaford! We have finished ages ago!"

Hilda was indeed absorbed in her letter. It was a long letter, and, as she perused it to the end, Hilda suppressed with difficulty the emotion it caused her.

She was about to fold it up when her eldest pupil, Julia, called out, "Are we to lose all the beauty of the evening just for your letter, Miss Seaford? I shall tell mamma how you kept us waiting! She does not at all approve of the servants having letters, and I'm sure she thinks you are a sort of a servant, too."

Miss Seaford looked up, saying slowly, "I shall expect you all to be ready for your evening walk in ten minutes—all except Julia, who will not go out, but will go to bed as a punishment for her rudeness."

Amid an outburst from Julia, Hilda leaves the room.

In another quarter of an hour she and four of Lady Rainforth's children are walking between the green hedge-rows toward the small town of Lillingham, where Helen wishes to buy several small articles. The time of year was early June, the weather befitted that loveliest season, and this walk ought to have been enjoyable. But the young Rainforths were striving and wrangling together, while Hilda was full of anxious thoughts about many things.

That letter she had just received was one of them—a letter urging her to reconsider her refusal to become Lady Dalston. Not that Hilda hesitated in her choice; she had confessed to herself that she loved Sydney Fraser, but it is difficult to some natures to put a hard decision into words—above all, for the second time.

But now Hilda and the Rainforth children are nearing Lillingham—a long, straggling country town, whose white houses show afar off.

"There is that foolish old man, Tommy Tutt!" exclaimed Helen, as they approached the place. "Don't you give him anything, Roger," added she.

"Not I!" replied Roger.

"Mamma says he ought to work," continued Helen.

"Well, you see he has been at work to-day," said Miss Seaford. "He has swept the road clean after market-day."

"Do you call *that* work?" sneered Helen.

"See, see! he looks queerer than ever!" exclaimed Roger, pointing to the old man.

He did indeed look unlike his fellows. A long, spare old man he was; clothed in light gray garments, with long, unkempt hair crowned by a dark Tyrolean hat, in which flaunted two gay feathers, while his lean legs were crossed and recrossed with colored ribbons.

As Hilda came near with her charges, he began to brush the way vigorously, thereby raising some of the dust from the white, scorched road.

"Troublesome old fellow!" exclaimed Helen, contemptuously.

"Covering us with dust like this! His broom ought to be taken away!" cried her sister Barbara.

"Catch me ever giving him another penny!" muttered Roger.

"Hush!" said Hilda, so sternly that the unruly children were quiet.

But not in time; the old man had heard every word.

The effect of their childish exclamation was singular. At first poor Tommy Tutt grew scarlet with anger; he paused, darting at the offenders a glance of fury, and there was a moment when Hilda feared he would have thrown his broom at Helen Rainforth. Then, on a sudden, he became calm, stood quite still, placed his hands on his sides, and broke into strange, harsh laughter.

"A pleasant evening, young ladies and gentlemen!" he called out. "You seem enjoying yourselves. So am I! I don't know when I've been so amused. Ha! ha! ha! So you don't ever mean to give old Tommy Tutt another penny, eh, my dears?"

Hilda had hastened to take out her purse. Often had she given bright three penny pieces, and even sixpenny bits, to the old man, but on the present occasion she offered him a new shilling, with her kindest smile and gentlest word, to make up in some sort for the unkindness of the children.

"Good luck to ye and my blessing, my dear young lady!" cried Tommy, as he accepted her gift. "Luck 'ull come; see if it doesn't! Ah, ah! how I am enjoying myself, my dears! A thousand thanks to you, too. You've helped Tommy Tutt out of a difficulty!"

"What does he mean, Miss Seaford, talking like that to us?" said Helen, when they had left the old man and his broom several yards in the rear.

"He means that he is very angry. Beware how you irritate him again. It is very unfeeling of you all to have said what you did," answered Hilda.

"But he ought to work," muttered Helen, confused.

They were now in Lillingham itself, and the talk concerning poor Tommy was dropped.

The little town was full of carts, carriages, and equestrians. Many of the tradesmen were standing gazing from their shop doors up the principal street, and Hilda was glad to get her unruly pupils safely to the principal stationer's, where Helen asked for the different trifles she wanted.

As Hilda waited, and the other children were staring at the articles spread out for sale, a gentleman rode up to the door on horseback, dismounted, threw his rein to a boy who ran up in hopes to earn sixpence, and entered.

It was Sydney Fraser.

"Do—do tell us," cried the children, crowding round him, "what you are going to give to cousin Emily for her wedding present? Of course, we can only give some small thing, such as a gold thimble, Julia and I, between us. But we should like to know what you mean to give, cousin Sydney?"

So the Rainforth children always designated Mr. Fraser, though, in truth, he was no relative, only their father's ward.

"I have not yet decided, Helen. It is difficult for a gentleman to find a suitable present for a lady. I'll talk it over with Miss Seaford, and ask her advice."

Helen returned to the counter where lay the trifles she had been considering; while Sydney said, in a low tone to Hilda, "I was riding through Lillingham, and caught a glimpse of you. How could I resist the opportunity of exchanging one word with you? I see you so seldom."

What could she answer to such an address, implying affection, yet not declaring it? Her

reply on this occasion was a blush, which she in vain attempted to repress—a blush which thrilled the young man with a secret hope, and made all sorts of bright visions dance before him.

"When midsummer comes, I shall know my fate—know whether I am to have riches or poverty as my lot," continued he; "and midsummer is not far distant now. That is a joyful time of year. I must hope that it will bring me joy."

"I shall hope it also," faltered Hilda.

Midsummer! A brief fortnight would see that longed-for day arrived; but during that fortnight Lady Emily was to be wedded from Rainforth House with great magnificence; and, as has been said, together with numerous other guests, the heir of the house was expected.

The Honorable Charles Rainforth could hardly be absent on such an occasion; but when he wrote, on the very eve of the bridal day, to explain that the sudden illness of a brother officer would prevent him getting leave of absence in time to be present at the ceremony, nobody grieved very much, although everybody expressed regret.

The heir of Rainforth House was not much loved, and his visits had always been marked with some anxiety or misfortune. In spite of that hopeful letter he had sent his mother, it was a relief to her when she knew that she was not to expect him.

CHAPTER V.

LADY EMILY'S WEDDING.

It is not our intention to chronicle in much detail Lady Emily's wedding. She was, no doubt, a very important personage in her own immediate circle; but she is quite a subordinate figure in this narrative, and is only mentioned because she unconsciously contributed to the ultimate fortunes of the chief actors in this story. Thus it will be sufficient to say that nothing was omitted to surround the bride with *eclat*, and to make the ceremony imposing. A bishop, with an assistant clergyman, read the service; the bridal gifts were displayed in the large saloon for the numerous guests to admire; all but the costly suit of diamonds, estimated at several thousand pounds, which adorned the bride herself.

There was a very large and fashionable assemblage in the country church—so large that the great dining-hall at Rainforth House could barely accommodate the guests. But Hilda was not among them. Lady Rainforth had told her that her room would be required for one of the visitors, and that she had, therefore, arranged for Miss Seaford to pass the day and night at the house of a clergyman in the neighborhood.

Hilda quite understood from this that she was not wanted during the wedding festivity, and gladly turned her back on Rainforth House, and walked across the sunny fields to the modest Parsonage, which had opened its doors to receive her.

Be sure that as she got among the quiet hedgerows, her thoughts were full of Sydney. It had been her task to marshal the younger children of Lady Rainforth to the church to witness the ceremony; so that she had seen Mr. Fraser as he came up the aisle among the wedding party.

And he had given her one look which set her heart aglow—which said, as plainly as words could say, "Dearest, my thoughts are all with you!"

After this, Hilda had no longer felt the slight of being thrust out from the house on such a day. He had remembered her—that was enough.

The Parsonage, to which Hilda was bending her steps, was empty save for one woman-servant, when Miss Seaford knocked at the door.

"Master and mistress have both gone over to see the wedding; but they told me to expect you, miss, and they'll be in soon after the breakfast. Your dinner's ready now, miss, whenever you please to have it."

Such was the greeting Hilda received from

the old servant. It did not displease her. She made her simple meal, then, taking her hat, went and sat in the small garden where the shade was pleasant.

But her solitude was filled with happy musings on Sydney. He surely was not indifferent to her, or he would not have sent her such a look full of affection that very morning.

This time next year how would it be with her? She could not help throwing a glance into the future, and at this moment hope predominated. But soon that accompaniment of love, fear, crept in, and would not be quite banished.

The afternoon wore away; neither host nor hostess returned.

"Missus is late, and master, too. I've brought you a cup of tea, miss," said the maid, reappearing toward five o'clock.

"You expected them earlier?" asked Hilda.

"Oh, yes, miss; missus wanted to be here, 'cos you was coming; and master, he'd parish business to see to. I wonder what it is that's kept them out so long."

Half an hour later the clergyman and his wife reached home. Their concerned looks surprised Hilda. Why did this good-natured couple appear so melancholy coming from a wedding feast?

"I hope nothing occurred to mar the happiness of the bridal—that everything went off well?" said Hilda, as she shook hands with each.

"Well, my dear Miss Seaford, something most unpleasant, most disastrous has occurred!" cried Mr. Blunt, the clergyman.

"A sad close to all the merriment at the breakfast," remarked Mrs. Blunt.

"Was the bride taken ill?" asked Hilda, quickly.

"No, no," replied the clergyman. "But, there! you tell Miss Seaford, my dear. I have to go out in the parish. You will relate what happened better than I."

By this time Hilda was listening intently; while Mrs. Blunt sat down, and, fanning herself, began:

"The breakfast was over. We—I mean the guests—were all assembled to witness the departure of the bride, and to wish her good speed. She had retired to put on her traveling costume, when somebody remarked that she was a very long time, and that the bride and bridegroom would miss the train for Chester (where they intended to go that day); and then Lady Rainforth, and next Lord Rainforth, was called out of the room. Then came another interval of waiting, while people asked, in undertones, 'What could have happened?' Oh, my dear Miss Seaford, you never will guess what had occurred!"

"No; I am sure I shall not; therefore, tell me at once, please, Mrs. Blunt!" cried Hilda, made quite nervous by the manner of this narration.

"Lady Emily's suite of diamonds, which she had worn at the wedding, were gone! They had disappeared apparently without hands. Seven thousand pounds' worth of costly jewels!"

"Gone!" echoed Hilda. "But how could that be? Did she not wear them during the breakfast, Mrs. Blunt?"

"Oh, yes; and most dazzling they looked, I can assure you! A complete necklace of diamonds, large diamond stars to fasten her white veil, a magnificent pendant of brilliants, with earrings to match! Indeed, I never saw such a sight! No princess could have been more richly adorned! And then to lose them all in a moment!"

Hilda drew a breath of relief at the remembrance that she had escaped being in the house at such an awkward moment. Then she asked, "But what steps were taken to discover the missing jewels? It seems incomprehensible how they could have been stolen."

"So it is to everybody," replied the clergyman's wife. "I shall never forget my sensations when Lord and Lady Rainforth returned into the saloon, followed by the bride and

bridegroom, and when his lordship said, looking very much troubled, 'A most unfortunate event has occurred; Lady Emily's diamonds are missing.'

"How sorry I am!" exclaimed Hilda. "I am afraid it made the bride feel sad upon her wedding-day."

"She was very sorry indeed; I could see that. However rich we may be, seven thousand pounds are not lost without concern. It made the departure of the bridal pair somewhat doleful, of course. Finally, they went off nearly a couple of hours later than had been arranged; but nothing whatever has been heard of the jewels. Poor Lady Rainforth! She would be heartily glad, under the circumstances, to escape giving her large dinner to-night; but the guests are staying in the house, and the repast is ordered. Lord Rainforth has telegraphed to Scotland Yard."

Mrs. Blunt had not done talking of the lost diamonds when, after breakfast next morning, Miss Seaford took leave of her, and returned to her duties at Rainforth House.

Hilda found the household there in much confusion—visitors departing, the children excited, detectives in the hall—a bewildered air in every one she encountered.

She felt glad to escape from the pervading confusion within the walls of the school-room; and here, too, she first clearly understood what had actually taken place.

Julia Rainforth was her informant, the rest of the children listening eagerly, and watching to see the effect the exciting story had on Miss Seaford.

"We can't sit down to our lessons just as usual, to day," cried Julia; "we must tell you about the jewel robbery, so listen, Miss Seaford! Besides, mamma asked me to tell you about it."

Thus adjured, Hilda delighted the children by saying how much she wanted to hear correctly how the robbery had been accomplished.

"That is just what nobody knows," cried Julia. "Oh, Miss Seaford, think of a mysterious theft being committed here at Rainforth House in broad daylight! It will be in all the newspapers! And there are the police searching all the rooms!"

"But tell me where Lady Emily took off her jewels," said Hilda. "She wore them in church and at the breakfast. And I suppose she took them off before putting on her traveling dress?"

"Yes, Miss Seaford. Cousin Emily had just taken them off; she had seen her maid put them away in the jewel-case, which lay on the toilet-table; there was nobody else in the room, when a knock came at the door of the ante-room which opened into Cousin Emmy's dressing-room."

"Go and see who it is," said Cousin Emmy to her maid, Andrews. So Andrews went at once, and when Emmy heard Charlie's voice (you know he was prevented being in time for the wedding, and was so disappointed at it), she ran to the door herself, Andrews standing by all the time, but a little apart. (Poor Andrews is so glad, now, that she didn't go back into the dressing-room!) Well, Cousin Emmy knew she hadn't too much time to spare, so that she could not stay long talking to Charlie, who had traveled down expressly to wish her joy. She thanked him, and then he opened a case he had brought with him—his present to Emmy, Miss Seaford—such a beautiful set of silver ornaments, and Emmy looks so well in silver!

"She was quite pleased with them, and told Charlie she liked them better than many of her more costly wedding gifts, and that was nearly all she stayed to say, and then she went back into the dressing-room, followed by Andrews. Nobody was there—the door, too, was shut exactly as they had left it, but the jewels were gone!"

"Cousin Emmy helped her maid to search all over the room, but it was of no use; and after that the whole house was searched. The police say that it is one of the most mysterious robberies they have heard of for a long time."

"Somebody must have opened the door of the dressing-room, and taken the jewels in that moment when your brother, Mr. Rainforth, was showing his gift to Lady Emily," said Hilda.

"That is just what the police say," replied Julia.

"I don't believe they know a bit what to do!" cried little Roger, who had listened with his mouth half open, and who was intensely interested in this mysterious theft.

"Everybody in the house has been questioned about it. You would have been questioned, too, Miss Seaford, by the detectives, if you had not been at Mr. Blunt's."

"How sincerely glad I am now not to have been here!" thought Hilda.

Barely had this passed through her mind when a servant entered, bringing a message from Lady Rainforth.

"Her ladyship would be much obliged to Miss Seaford to go down to the library immediately."

Hilda obeyed, but was somewhat startled, on reaching the apartment, to see, instead of Lady Rainforth, two men, strangers to her, and also Lord Rainforth.

The latter advanced a few steps to meet her.

"You have heard of the very disagreeable and painful occurrence in my house, Miss Seaford?" began his lordship. "Of course, I at once communicated with the authorities at Scotland Yard. These police-officers wish to ask you a few questions, which may aid them to find a clue to the strange robbery which has been perpetrated."

"What could she be expected to know—she, who was not there?" thought the bewildered girl.

"Sit down, miss; we sha'n't detain you long," said one of the officers. "You see, this is a very mysterious affair, and we must follow up the smallest matter that can throw light on it. On making very searching inquiry, it seems that one of the under housemaids here, named Jane Barker, met a neatly-dressed young man at the end of the corridor leading to the dressing-room from which the jewels were stolen. She thought this young man was one of the attendants hired to assist at the wedding breakfast; but a trifling incident induces us to fasten on that person as the one who made off with the diamonds. We have taken the liberty to send for you, miss, that we may ask you a few questions, which may throw a light upon our conjecture."

"I!" exclaimed the astonished Hilda. "Are you aware that I was not even in the house?"

"Just so, miss; so his lordship has explained. He has also mentioned another little circumstance which occurred lately, when we were endeavoring to discover whether any strangers had been hanging about the place. Will you be kind enough to describe, miss, the sort of woman that was you came upon in the garden a short time since, when you went out so late to call in the pet dog?"

"Describe her?" cried Hilda. "It was such a momentary glance, and I was so frightened, that any description I could give would hardly be reliable."

"That's true, miss. You couldn't go into details; but you received an impression, I take it. You had a sort of idea whether that woman was tall or short, bulky or thin, scared or quiet in appearance?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" answered Hilda. "She was a wild, white-looking woman, defiant, strange! Her appearance frightened me, quite apart from the fact of her being in the grounds at that time of night."

"Ah!" exclaimed the police-officer. "And the following night you observed a man slinking about the place, keeping in the shadow? Could you make out whether he was tall or short, miss?"

"Rather tall, certainly—not very," replied Hilda.

"Very well, miss. Then my theory is that that man, and the wild, white-looking woman,

and the nicely-dressed young man that the under housemaid saw at the end of the corridor, were all one and the same person. And my mind is equally made up that that woman you saw was no stranger, but a person about the house continually; for you see, the dogs did not bark!"

"That is true," replied Hilda.

"I attached no importance to the circumstance at the time Miss Seaford mentioned it," said Lord Rainforth; "but now, indeed, I see it differently."

"Ah, these small things help to throw light on great matters, my lord," answered the detective who had been spokesman, the other making notes of what was said. "Depend upon it, that young man the housemaid saw was a woman in a remarkably good disguise; moreover, that she was the particular woman this young lady ran up against in your grounds so late at night."

"What are your reasons for thinking so?" asked Lord Rainforth.

"Why, my lord, your servant tells me, in answer to very minute questions I put to her, that the supposed waiter was very white, and had a scared look; also he was tall; and was stupid enough to drop his handkerchief. The girl ran after him to give it back; but he went on as if he did not hear her call to him, and disappeared through a doorway; nor could she find him again. Then, too, the handkerchief had a woman's name in the corner—'Charlotte.' And soon after the jewels were missed."

"Dear me!—dear me!" exclaimed Lord Rainforth, pacing the lofty apartment with agitated strides. "Who would have imagined such deceit? Lady Rainforth and myself are full of regret that we did not attach more importance to Miss Seaford's encounter with that unknown woman. And you believe her to be an inmate of this house, officer?"

"I do, my lord, or some one who is on extremely friendly terms with your dogs. There is no deceiving a dog, my lord! They would have barked smartly enough at a stranger."

"I will get quit of the whole present set of servants! Let me harbor no thief, at least!" cried his indignant lordship.

"That is just the course I would beg your lordship not to pursue. Pretend to think that a stranger entered your house in disguise, feign to have implicit confidence in those of your household, if you ever wish to hear a word of the lost diamonds. The jewels are far enough from Rainforth by this time, my lord. The question is—where?"

"Can I give you any other information?" asked Hilda of the detective.

"I'm afraid not, miss. But you have helped to give the single clue we hold at present. I think it would be well under present circumstances to spread the story of the woman this young lady saw in the grounds the other night. That will set the thief's mind at ease, and perhaps put him off his guard. No, thank you, miss; you can't tell us any more, I suppose, so we will not detain you."

Lord Rainforth also thanked Miss Seaford stiffly, and she retired.

At the door his lordship spoke another word.

"Miss Seaford, you had better tell the children that story about going out to find Bijou. They will repeat it, and I also will allude to it, so that it will soon spread."

"Very well, my lord."

Julia Rainforth, and, indeed, all the children who were watching for the return of their governess, were excited in no small degree when they heard that she had been questioned by a police-officer.

"But you were not here when the diamonds were stolen!" cried Roger.

Then Miss Seaford told them the story of Bijou and the unknown woman.

In the midst of the extreme amazement this caused the children, their brother Charles knocked at the door of the school-room. He came to see if Julia would ride with him that afternoon.

"Oh, yes! yes thank you, Charlie!" exclaimed Julia. "Come in! We have something so wonderful to tell you! Miss Seaford has seen the woman who stole Emmy's jewels! We are nearly sure she has!"

And then, in chorus, the strange adventure of which Bijou had been the cause, was related. Hilda had rarely seen this eldest son and heir to the family honors of Rainforth, and glanced at him for a moment as his young brothers and sisters detailed in eager, disjointed fashion the strange occurrence. And as she glanced, Hilda noticed a pained, strained expression about the corners of his mouth—a white ashen hue steal over his visage, which twitched nervously.

For the first moment or two he gave no exclamation of surprise at the bewildering recital told so eagerly by Hilda's pupils, a circumstance which caused them much astonishment. What! Did not Charlie think what they had said wonderful!—something like a story in print?

Thus apostrophized, the much-admired elder brother professed all the astonishment expected of him, but did so in such a forced, unnatural way that Hilda observed it silently.

But what had the heir of Lord Rainforth to do with the unknown woman, or with the lost jewels? Plainly he had not taken them! Was he not actually talking to his cousin at the moment they were carried off?

Had he not hurried down at the latest moment to wish her joy, bringing with him a beautiful wedding gift?

There could be no connection between the Hon. Charles Rainforth and a daring thief!

CHAPTER VI.

"FROM TOMMY TUTT."

THE days which immediately succeeded the jewel robbery were filled with fruitless search—inquiries which resulted in nothing; the going and coming of police-officers; but not the faintest trace of the missing property was found.

Quietly as they had disappeared, the diamonds eluded all attempts at regaining them; the expense and trouble put forth to discover the gems was all in vain.

So much had been talked of Lady Emily's lost diamonds, that at the end of a week even the inmates of Rainforth House grew tired of hearing of the stolen jewels.

Lord and Lady Rainforth went up to town, the Hon. Charles Rainforth and Mr. Fraser went also, leaving Miss Seaford with her pupils in the country.

How blank and empty was the house without Sydney's presence! Hilda had not before estimated how much he was to her! She asked herself in dismay what life would be worth if she were destined to pass through it unblest by his companionship! And yet she knew full well that many a girl had loved as tenderly as she, and been forsaken, or separated from the loved one by untoward circumstances.

Julia Rainforth, who was fifteen, and thought herself grown up, was greatly disturbed at not going to London this year, and was only consoled by being told that she and all the school-room party were to go on a short visit to their doting grandmother toward Midsummer Day.

"You'll be left in the house all alone then, Miss Seaford," said Roger; "or as good as alone, for nurse and the two under-nurses will go with us, and most of the servants are in London. And those that are here are going for their holiday; it's the most convenient time, mamma says. Mamma always lets the maids have a week's holiday in the summer when she is away. Those that are left here, I mean."

"There'll be a kitchen-maid in the house, Miss Seaford, and old Mrs. Jones, the coachman's wife, so they'll manage to wait on you," said Julia.

It was not a matter of much concern to Hilda. To be free for a whole week in this lovely place in the loveliest time of the year

was enough for her. She would be satisfied with very scant attendance.

The summer days might roll away monotonously, but they would be cheered by the pleasant sun which made all nature bright.

Often as Hilda had paced about the wide, delightful gardens, she thought of her encounter with the unknown woman at whom Bijou had not barked, but far oftener her thoughts dwelt on Sydney Fraser and the few low-toned words he had managed to breathe in her ear as he bade her good-by before accompanying Lord and Lady Rainforth to town.

"When we meet again," he had said, "I shall know my fate—know what prospects are before me; and then, what I most covet I shall at least dare to sue for!"

That was all, as he clasped her fingers in his with gentle pressure; but the look, the tone which went with them, said, oh, how much more! And the remembrance gilded these days of waiting with a far brighter sunlight than the material warmth shot down from the rays of the veritable luminary above.

She could dream as long as she listed tonight in the lovely summer twilight, since her pupils had set off that morning to pay the much-talked-of visit to their grandmother, for to-morrow was Midsummer Day.

How silent was the large mansion, emptied of its usual inmates! Master, mistress, and children absent, as were also most of the servants.

But what a sense of freedom and relief it gave to Hilda! One alone in that house had shown her kindness—to one alone her heart turned as she sat musing of past and future!

And as she thus dreamed on, watching the lingering glories in the sky—asking herself how it would be with her when another year had brought midsummer round again—part of the web of her life was being woven by strange hands, of which she knew nothing.

The school-room at Rainforth House was situated on the ground-floor, at an extremity of the building commanding from one of its windows a view of the flower-garden; and here sat Hilda on this night, made so memorable by after-circumstances in her young life.

"When I see him again, what will he tell me? What will be his lot—riches or poverty? Ah! if it were poverty, and if it were given to me to soften it—to work with him and for him!"

Thus she had thought as her heart followed Sydney Fraser, when her musing was interrupted by a knock at the door, abrupt and loud; the first note in the chord struck in her destiny, if she could have known it! But she only saw Maria, the kitchen-maid, who entered, saying, "Oh, if you please, miss, here's a note that little Jimmy Hall, one of the garden boys, has just brought, and he's waiting, miss, for your answer."

"Who could have written to her?" thought Hilda. Or, rather, who had sent a letter at that hour in the evening? It was now half-past nine o'clock, and in that country place no post arrived so late.

A queer-looking note it was, too, bulky, and addressed in an awkward hand which she had not seen before.

But bulky as was the envelope, it contained but the few following words, scrawled unevenly on a thick sheet of paper:

"DEAR MISS,—
"Do not refuse to come and see poor Tommy Tutt once more. I'm dying this time. Be sure to come."

A slight shiver ran through Hilda. Summoned thus suddenly to the bedside of the poor crossing-sweeper to whom she had occasionally given small coins, accompanied with many kind words and smiles whose remembrance lingered with the old man, Hilda felt awed and troubled.

"Maria," said she to the maid who was still waiting, "can you go with me to poor old Tutt's cottage? He writes to beg me to go at once. He says he is dying."

"Well, miss, I don't think I can get away,"

answered Maria, who knew that supper was ready. "But you might take Jimmy Hall along with you, miss. He's waiting for an answer, you know."

"Ask him if he will go with me, Maria, and wait to come back with me."

In two minutes Maria returned to say that Jimmy Hall would willingly accompany Miss Seaford, and in another five minutes Hilda, in company with the little boy, had turned her footsteps toward Tommy Tutt's cottage.

Her guide was stumpy of stature, and only about nine years old, so that he could hardly be called a protection. However, he was a companion, and trudged along sturdily and in silence.

"This 'ull be the shortest way," said little Jimmy, speaking for the first time, as they gained the entrance to a narrow lane lying in deepest shadow; for here the luminous twilight could not penetrate, so thick were the overhanging boughs of the trees above, so deeply did the path dip between two steep banks on which these trees grew.

"Are you taking me *this* way?" cried Hilda, shrinking back.

There was an uncomfortable story connected with this path, and she recalled it now. People said that a robbery had been committed here a few years ago, and in broad daylight—nay, there was a legend that a man had been killed on this spot thirty years since. It looked so awesome at this hour.

"Ye b'ain't afeared, are ye, miss?" asked Jimmy, laughing. "I knows what they say o' the place, I do; but, lor, 'twill save ye a matter o' harf a mile; and I often plays in the lane, me and my little brother. We ain't afeared. We never see nothin' to hurt us. Five minutes, and you'll be at t'other end."

Jimmy's courageous speech reassured Hilda. She reflected that in all probability Jimmy was right; that while she lingered, poor Tommy Tutt might die without seeing her, so she decided to traverse the lane, and at once plunged into the black shade.

"You follow me," said Jimmy, cheerily.

It was well he had plenty of courage, for the young lady felt hers ebbing away rapidly.

"What was that, Jimmy?" said she, breathlessly, as a something she could not define moved near her—a movement which as instantly sunk into silence, a rustling which ceased as suddenly as it had commenced.

What was it? A footstep; then silence, as if an unknown presence was close to her, and she was unable to seize it. Catching her breath nervously, she hastened on.

How long appeared the five minutes occupied in reaching the outlet of this lane. Oh, what a relief to leave its gloom and gain the broad high road, showing plainly in the summer twilight! The soft wind blew freely here, not in mysterious whispers, as in that hollow through which they had passed.

"Jimmy," said Hilda, drawing a deep breath, "you must not take me back that way, it is so dark; and, besides, didn't you think you heard some one close to us in the very middle of the lane? Whoever it was, I think there were two people who wished to hide themselves from us. I am sure I heard a person mutter one word, and then all was silent."

"I heerd a summat, but I doesn't know what," replied Jimmy, beginning to whistle.

He was a stolid boy; it was not easy to move him.

"Did you hear any one whisper, Jimmy?" asked Hilda, whispering herself, lest any one should be pursuing them.

"Seemed like as if they said, 'Here,'" replied the boy.

"Yes; I am certain two people were hiding," exclaimed Hilda. "We must go back along this road."

"Very well, ma'am," answered Jimmy, quietly. "There's a many rabbits as runs about," continued he, after a moment's pause. "I've seen scores i' the daytime. They make a noise scudding past."

"Rabbits do not speak," said Hilda,

"No-o-o-o!" responded Jimmy, slowly, as if he were considering the matter.

But now, twenty paces off, poor Tommy Tutt's cottage appeared in view—a tiny hut, half hidden amidst bushes by the roadside.

There was a light in the upper window, and through the open door of the kitchen a woman's cap was discernible.

This woman rose to meet them as they opened the garden gate.

"Have ye brought the young lady?" she cried. "Poor old man, he's bad to-night! And the doctor's with him; so's the clergyman."

"Here I am," replied Hilda. "Had I better go up-stairs at once?" added she, with faltering accent, for she shrunk from the duty imposed on her.

The woman nodded, then led the way, and they climbed the ladder-like stairs together.

Tommy Tutt lay on the narrow bed in his tiny chamber, eagerly watching for the entrance of Hilda, his eyes sparkling with unnatural brilliancy.

"She's come!" he cried, triumphantly. "I told you she'd come!"

There were two gentlemen in the small chamber, one of whom Hilda recognized as the doctor, the other as the vicar of the parish.

"You will do more to ease the poor man than we shall," said the doctor, as she approached the bed; "he has so much desired to speak to you."

"And perhaps we had better leave you alone," observed the clergyman, preparing to go down stairs.

"Stay a bit!" cried Tommy, feebly. "Don't go, gentlemen! I want ye to stay and hear what I've got to say to this young lady. Then, when I'm gone, there can't be no disputing."

The doctor and the clergyman arrested their steps, as the old man continued, turning to Hilda. "'Tis my turn, now, to give you something, my dear young lady; and you give my love to Miss Helen Rainforth, and tell her she's lost something by not being civil to an old man. You shall have what I once meant for her. Gentlemen, I'm quite alone in the world, no chick nor child, nobody belonging to me left."

Then again speaking to Hilda.

"I don't want the trouble of making a will. I'd far rather make a present of what I've got to leave while I'm alive. Nobody can hinder me from doing that!"

He fumbled under his bolster as he spoke.

"And here's my present to you, my dear; take it, and an old man's blessing along with it. What's inside nobody knows but me, but whatever it is it's for you, and no one else!"

Hilda stretched out her hand to the old man's withered and shaking one, and received from it a thick, large envelope. There was pity, sympathy, trouble for his suffering in her look. She had more thought of him than of his gift.

"I'm glad for you to have it, my dear," continued Tommy Tutt. "It's more than you'd think, for I was apprenticed to a good trade in my young days, and saved a little money. But when all belonging to me died one after t'other, I didn't care so much for saving. I swep' the road 'cos I liked being in the air, and 'twas something I could do to earn a little. Ah, dear! Give me a drop of something to drink."

Hilda offered the tea which had been placed near him, and she murmured as she did so her thanks for his kind remembrance of her.

"I would advise that you let him sleep now, and call to see him in the morning. He is so exhausted with talking," interposed the medical man.

"Ah, i' the morning!" muttered the old man, as he drank the tea.

Hilda replaced the cup, arranged his pillow, then obeying a sign from the doctor, crept softly down-stairs.

What was it she carried with her in the envelope given her by the dying man?

She did not stop to ask herself; nor later in the evening, after she had returned to Rain-

forth House, could she imagine that poor Tommy Tutt's gift carried with it her own fortune and the fate of him she loved.

When Hilda left the cottage, and got into the pleasant night air, nightingales were trilling. The stars shone out of a clear sky; the night was altogether beautiful.

But it was sultry. Jimmy Hall was the first to speak.

"Feyther says as there'll be a storm afore long, 'cos 'tis so hot."

"Jimmy," said Hilda, disregarding his remark, "mind that you are not to go back by the lane."

"I knows that," replied Jimmy.

And so they took their way along the dusty road.

"I never feels timid, as women folk do," remarked the boy, as they approached a clump of trees by the roadside.

They had passed this clump, and were nearing the park at Rainforth, when Hilda said, softly, to Jimmy, "What is that?"

She pointed at the same time to a furze-bush, against which (so it seemed to her) a woman was standing.

A woman who was tall, who looked wild and white, and who stared at the advancing figures in an odd, fixed manner.

"It is the woman I saw in the garden, Jimmy!" cried Hilda, clutching the boy's shoulder.

By this time all in the village had heard of Miss Seaford's adventure in the grounds at Rainforth House.

Jimmy was a little startled—not much.

"Be ye sure?" was all he had time to ask, when the outline of another figure became discernible against the furze-bush.

Hilda trembled. What could she and this young child, but nine years old, do if the man and woman attacked her?

For just one moment she and Jimmy stood at bay; for a single instant, too, the woman and her accomplice faced the young lady and the boy—or, rather, the woman did; the man kept well in the shadow, though he held his ground, but only for a moment. The next, both turned, and, crashing through the slight hedge behind them, were lost in the Rainforth woods.

Right glad was Hilda when she again entered Rainforth House. In the shelter of her own room she opened the envelope containing poor old Tutt's gift, and found it to contain bank-notes to the value of thirteen hundred pounds.

CHAPTER VII.

MIDSUMMER EVE.

THIRTEEN hundred pounds seemed like great wealth to Hilda. It is true that it would not free her from the necessity of earning for herself; but what a fund to fall back on in case of any necessity!

Then, too, if—if Sydney Fraser ever came to her with words of love, and yet had to tell her that poverty was his lot, what joy to her to whisper to him that she would not be a wholly portionless bride!

So mused the fair Hilda, unconscious girl! Far other was to be the result of poor Tommy Tutt's gift.

With the returning light her earliest thought was of the old man who was so near his end, and who had done so much for her.

She locked away securely the precious envelope, and after a hasty breakfast set out for the cottage. She no longer felt afraid of the mysterious woman when the morning sun was flooding the world with its beauty. Birds were caroling, men going to their work, women and children at their cottage doors; but she would not pass down the lane, preferring half an hour's walk to that gruesome place, even in sunlight.

Her thoughts were entirely occupied with what she might yet do for Tommy Tutt's comfort, as the cottage he inhabited came into view.

She glanced in at the window of his tiny room, across which a curtain was drawn; then

the truth darted suddenly into her mind that she could do nothing more for Tommy, and on entering the cottage she found her surmise true.

The duty, so unexpected and so new to her, of giving orders for the simple funeral, occupied much of the morning. The sun was hotter than ever to-day, and Hilda was glad to rest in the afternoon; glad to collect her thoughts, and to ponder whether this unlooked-for bequest received by her could help her to change her ungenial occupation for some other mode of living.

"But would I leave this roof, even if I could do so? Oh, no, no! Welcome slights, welcome coldness, if I may from time to time see Sydney Fraser, and hear his voice!"

So much she confessed to herself as the evening drew on.

The large house seemed empty, deserted. There was no one to interrupt the current of her musing.

Slowly the night crept down—a night strangely unlike the lovely evening of yesterday. Then the heavens were luminous, though no moon lighted up their depths; the stars shone clear, the air just stirred in the woods where the nightingales were waking the echoes with their jubilant song.

But to-night there was that mysterious weight and dread in the air which are the precursors of a storm.

Great masses of cloud, heavy with blackness, piled themselves in the west, slowly spreading higher and on all sides.

No trill of the nightingale broke the silence. It was as if the birds themselves presaged the coming storm, and shrunk from it.

"And this is Midsummer Night," thought Hilda, leaning from the window.

She, too, felt an awe, a thrill of dread, as the black masses in the sky piled themselves slowly to the meridian.

"It will be a long-lasting storm; it gathers so slowly," her thoughts went on.

All at once, through the still, wide mansion, a bell sounded—the front door bell.

Alone as she was, the simple incident startled Hilda, and she listened intently as Maria, with heavy footstep, went to the hall door.

"I must see Miss Seaford for a moment. I have a message."

"She's in the school-room, sir."

So much Hilda distinguished, with a throbbing heart, for the voice was Sydney's, but so disturbed, so unlike his usual tone, that she knew in an instant that he had suffered some misfortune.

But she would see him, should hear from his own lips what had happened.

Maria pushed open the door of the apartment, saying, "Mr. Fraser, if you please, miss, wants to see you."

And Sydney entered.

It was already nearly ten o'clock, and a light was burning on a distant table.

Hilda, catching a glimpse of his features, felt her heart sink.

Not with this mien, not with such looks, would he come to her if about to ask for her love. But yet, as he grasped her hand in his, his clutch was lingering, passionate.

"Miss Seaford," said he, in a husky voice, "I am come to bid you adieu, for I have resolved, or, rather, it has been resolved for me, that Rainforth House is not to be my home any longer."

"You are going away?" asked Hilda, her voice faltering.

"Yes, I am going away," repeated he, with so strange an accent that Hilda glanced at him questioning.

For a moment neither spoke; the corners of that large room were filled with gloom. How was the young girl to know what was in his heart, when he came to her with such a mien? What was behind the trouble she was enduring? for that there was trouble she was quick to feel! And yet she did not dare to break the silence; but stood as if spellbound,

lest she might unwittingly betray how much she felt.

"It is a long journey, the place to which I am bound," continued he. "But no matter! Since I must go, it shall be at once."

Suppressing the tears which tried to force their way, Hilda essayed to frame a question; but he went on rapidly, and still more passionately.

"And it would have been well, perhaps, if I had gone without this adieu; but that was too hard for me. Miss Seaford, when we have few friends, those few are doubly valued."

Hilda, shaken to the heart, asked herself what this meant.

Friendship!—ah, that was dear! But love was far more precious.

Was it friendship only that he felt for her? It was not for Hilda, however, to allow what she felt to appear, and it was as much as she could do to repress her emotion.

"Mr. Fraser, let a friend ask the reason of this sudden resolve," faltered she. "You had hopes—"

"Hopes!" interrupted he. "They have perished. But that is not the worst. Ah, no! You will know—you will hear afterward *why* it is, *how* it is that I am here to bid you adieu, instead of—" Here he broke off, with an impassioned gesture, as if he checked the avowal which seemed hovering on his lips, and, starting up, paced the apartment. But in a moment or two he subdued these signs of distress, and took the seat by Hilda, speaking with unnatural calm. "My uncle and aunt, as I have called Lord and Lady Rainforth, have intimated to me in the plainest language that I am not to regard this house as my home any longer."

"Miss Seaford, do you remember what I once told you about my uncle's eccentric will? I explained its provisions. The codicil was to be retained unopened for twenty years, and not to be read till the anniversary of his death, this very Midsummer Day. Any infringement of these directions, the opening before the time, or the loss of the codicil, was to result in leaving me penniless; since, in that case, half my uncle's property was to go to a hospital, half to Charles Rainforth. Well, what has happened is this. The codicil is lost. It can never have been in the iron box in which it was supposed to be lying all the past twenty years. How can one hope to find a paper lost so long ago? And I—would that I had died, or that I had never been born!"

"Oh, why do you speak so bitterly, Mr. Fraser?" asked Hilda, entreatingly. "But I do not wish to blame you. Thrust out from what has been your home, your hopes shattered, you may be pardoned for feeling bitterly. But again, I say, let a true friend ask you what—what you propose doing?"

"To put the furthest possible distance between myself and Rainforth House," exclaimed he, his voice breaking again into passion. "Would you know why? You shall know. You shall; but not here, not now. See, I have written it for you here to-day, and you shall read it by-and-by, and judge for yourself. There are some stories too bitter to be repeated."

He spoke with a strange despair, a hopelessness she had not expected, which moved her deeply.

There was a desperation in his accent which even his crushed hopes of wealth, the unkindness of his guardians, could not wholly account for.

But it was no light thing to find poverty instead of wealth at the end of twenty-three years of waiting; no light matter to meet with coldness where affection had been proffered. So Hilda argued with that rapid flash of thought with which we all so often settle difficult mental questioning.

"In whatever way I am to learn the story of your wrongs, be sure that I shall feel them deeply, sympathize truly," faltered Hilda.

What more could she say—she who dared not avow her love, since he had not spoken of his?

"Take this, then," he said, offering her a sealed letter; "but promise me that you will not open it till midnight. Read it in the quiet of your chamber."

"I promise," she answered, as she received it from him.

He drew a deep sigh, passing his hand over his clouded brow.

"Now, for a few moments, then, you and I will be together," said he, as if thrusting away a painful remembrance.

He placed himself on the sofa beside her, regarding her with an inexpressive look.

The brief silence which ensued was too embarrassing for Hilda to bear. In every look and tone Sydney Fraser had *implied* love for her; but he had not declared it.

"You have come from town to-day, Mr. Fraser? You have parted from Lord and Lady Rainforth?" she articulated, with difficulty.

"Yes," he said—"yes; from them, and from all; and now, last and bitterest parting, from *you*!"

"Is it good, then, that friends should part forever?" she faltered out.

It was the only thing she could say to intimate her willingness *not* to part—that they two should fight the battle of life together.

"Good? No; but it is sometimes imperative!" he exclaimed, as if pierced with sharp pain at some recollection.

"Are you quite sure that it is imperative? Mr. Fraser, there is an old saying that there is safety in counsel. May I venture to—to offer mine?"

He looked at her speechlessly, while his face assumed an expression of agony.

"No counsel—not even *yours*—could aid me!" he replied.

What could she add when he spoke like this? If he had said one explicit word she would have had the right to implore him not to think too much of poverty, for that they would work together, and together conquer it and all other ills of life; the courage to tell him that her warmth of devotion should make him forget the coldness of others. But that plain word he had not spoken; and so Hilda kept silence when he answered her as he had done.

But she still held his letter in her hand. Perchance that would speak—perchance that would tell her what he did not declare in plain terms in this interview. If that were so she might be permitted to say by letter that which she might not now avow.

Another silence fell between the agitated pair, during which Sydney suddenly put out his hand, and laid it softly on hers.

She did not withdraw her hand; it was his, if he would ask her for it. But did he desire it, or did he only crave that friendship in a great distress which many men, in like circumstances, have sought from women? How could the young girl determine?

The tears were ready to fall; she could not speak; she sat immovable, as did he.

Breaking into that silence was a voice we all listen to, as we obey in some sort its mandates—the striking of the hour. Half-past ten sounded from the hall clock, and from half a dozen others. The opening and closing of a door, too, gave warning that Maria was probably waiting with suppressed impatience for the departure of the visitor.

Yesterday, only yesterday, had she dared to hope, and was this the termination of her blissful expectations? She had always heard that joy is fleeting; but hers had been so evanescent, that, perhaps, she would have suffered less of pain if no joy had at all gilded her horizon.

His departure? Was this to be their last good-by? This the end of all her happy dreams? Henceforth would all her days rise with a veil of sorrow over them?

Suddenly Sydney clasped Hilda's hand painfully tight in his own.

"Do not read my explanation yet—promise me again that you will not peruse it till toward midnight. When all is hushed—when you can consider matters calmly," said he in passionate accents.

"Whatever you wish," she replied, faltering. Would he, indeed, quit her like this?

"You do not leave England yet? At least, not—not immediately?" she added, striving to repress her tears.

"Very, very soon!" he replied, regarding her with fixed gaze, as if he *could* not tear himself away.

But still he was silent as to that which Hilda was so greatly longing to hear.

Soon! He would go soon! But to-night she would peruse his letter! Surely *that* would speak! And then she would send such words after him as must recall him!

"You will read it at midnight only?" he repeated, looking down on her with emotion.

"At midnight!—not till then, since it is your wish," she murmured.

Then, without further warning—without a word more, he suddenly caught her in his arms, raining kisses on her forehead, on her cheek, and on her hair.

"This is good-by—this my adieu!" he ejaculated, with choking voice. "Oh, I did not think thus to tell you of my love! Adieu!—adieu, for ever, in this world!"

Wildly he pressed her to his heart, then rushed from her presence like a man possessed; and Hilda, trembling like an aspen leaf, torn at once with exquisite joy at the knowledge of his love, and with grief at his departure, heard him dash out into the night.

The closing scene had passed so rapidly, he had so taken her by surprise, that Hilda had not recovered from it when she found herself alone—alone with a vague, but deep uneasiness mingling with her excitement and her joy.

He loved her; but he had left her! He had rushed determinedly from her presence. What did it mean? Would she know at midnight?

Were they betrothal kisses, those that he had planted on her brow, or an eternal, a despairing adieu?

A wild grief leapt up in her heart as she remembered his words.

"Adieu, forever, in this world!"

"But my love shall reach him wherever he is. He has spoken now, and I may speak too," thought Hilda.

The recollection comforted her, soothed the wild throbbing of her heart. To-morrow he should understand that she did not dread poverty with him—that she feared nothing but separation from him.

A knock at the door, and Maria entered.

"Oh, if you please, miss, Mrs. Jones sent me to ask if Mr. Fraser wouldn't like a bed made up, instead of going back to town?"

"Mr. Fraser is already gone, Maria, thank you."

"Gone, miss? I was listening for the bell to let him out. Well, 'tis to be hoped he'll get to the station before the storm bursts. Listen to that, miss! It sounds like the roar of the ocean!"

Hilda had been too much absorbed to listen to the voice of the gathering clouds; but now, as she was recalled to the outer world by Maria's remark, she was awed by the rising roll of the deep-toned thunder. Swelling on the ear in a long burst of terrible anger, it died away lingeringly, only to gather again with rumbling noise.

"Isn't it a sound like a great wave, miss? I wouldn't be out in it to-night, miss—no, not if you'd give me ever so!"

"Is it raining, Maria?" asked Hilda, who was calculating anxiously how soon Sydney would reach the station.

"No, miss; 'tisn't raining yet, but when it does begin, there will be a downpour! Oh, it's awful to be out in a great storm! Mrs. Jones and I are going to bed, if you don't want anything else, miss."

"Nothing, thank you, Maria. I am going up-stairs too."

Eleven o'clock struck as she gained her room. One more hour to wait before she could read Sydney's letter.

Hilda kissed the envelope he had given her, and then, extinguishing her candle, drew aside

her curtain to watch the storm. The lightning was so vivid as to flood the room with its glare—then came the rolling, awful thunder.

Had Sydney yet reached the station? Oh, yes! The railway was not so far distant but that a quick walker would reach it in twenty minutes.

And this was Midsummer Night! Ah, how she should forever remember it!

She was, indeed, to remember it, all her life long! Nothing could ever blot it from her memory.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD-FLOWER VILLA.

THE hour which succeeded was not long, strange to say, to the waiting girl. How could it be, with the words ringing in her heart, "He loves me!"

The thunder roared now in deafening peals which followed each other rapidly, the lightning was blinding, while the scene from her window was sublime and terrible.

She shivered nervously as she remembered last night's walk with Jimmy Hall through the fearsome lane; and with this thought came another—that of the unknown woman whom she had again seen by the furze-bush.

And now midnight sounded, booming dull through a long reverberation of thunder.

Hilda waited till the last stroke had died away—she would carefully obey Sydney's behest,—then she relighted her taper, and, as another thunder-clap shook the casement, opened the letter with trembling fingers.

Undoubtedly she was to know what Sydney meant, but not what she supposed. Unhappy Hilda!

She paused for a brief second, overcome by emotion, holding the letter in her hand. Then she hastily took it from its cover.

But what was this? An inner envelope—open, and unaddressed! No matter; it was meant for her, and she took out the sheet of paper from the smaller envelope.

Eagerly her looks fastened on the lines before her; but she grew ghastly pale as she perused them. They were not meant for her, that was evident; they had been intended for Lord Rainforth's eldest son, but by some mistake of Sydney's—probably a mistake engendered by his agitation—he had given the letter intended for Charles Rainforth to Hilda herself.

What was its purport? What could Sydney have written, to make the young girl's breath come so thick and fast, to cause her to become as white and cold as marble? What? Such words as these met her gaze:—

"Know that you will be the cause of my death! To-night, as the clock strikes one, while you are still at some scene of revelry, I shall have passed out of this life into another! One pistol-shot will end all! That friendly weapon lies now in your father's untenanted house at Wildflower Villa. On your head be the crime. You know I should be disgraced if I could not produce the thousand pounds, and you leave me to my fate—you, the cause of the unjust suspicion which will fall upon me, and which I will not survive."

SYDNEY FRASER.

What an awful disclosure! To what dark transaction of Charles Rainforth's did it point.

Swiftly these questions formed in Hilda's mind as she sprung to her feet. To-night, did he leave her to die—to die by his own hand? Was that the meaning of his despair—of his desperate adieu?

Then another trembling question darted into her brain. Could she yet save him? Would time be granted her? How many minutes had elapsed since she knew the awful truth? Five? No; two—only two; but they seemed to her two centuries of torture.

Amid a crash of thunder which deadened all noise, she staggered to the drawer in which she had locked poor Tommy Tutt's bequest, hastily secured it about her, threw around her a thick cloak (for by this time the rain was pouring down in torrents, accompanied by the continuous roar of the storm), then withdrew the bolts of the inner door which led onto the veranda, next those of the outer one, each moment ask-

ing herself, with sickening fear—"Shall I be in time?"

Time! That was everything to her in this moment! Ten minutes—five—ah, even a second or two might make all the difference—the difference between happiness and misery, between life and death!

While stealing from the veranda she recollected that she had no means of procuring a light when she should reach Wildflower Villa, so she returned into the room, hid within the folds of her dress matches and a wax taper, then plunged into the wildness of the storm now raging in renewed fury.

Hilda had no need to go softly down the stairway which led to the gardens; none could distinguish her steps through the roar of the elements. Little, indeed, had she foreseen a second journey down this stairway in the night. On that first occasion she had felt panic-stricken at sight of the wild, white woman who had confronted her, but in the dread which assailed her now there was no time to dwell on any personal fears. All other terrors merged into one—that she might not be in time to save Sydney.

Only six minutes had passed since she had read the fatal letter before she stood below prepared for her fearful journey. She must make it without a pause the shortest way, and must shroud herself from the view of any belated traveler; for to be stopped, to be robbed, perhaps, of what she was carrying, would be fatal. How could she be assured that even her presence would avail to arrest the rash act if she arrived without the means of saying to the despairing Sydney, "Here is the money you want?"

One of those pauses in a storm which last for many hours succeeded the crash of the thunderclap, as Hilda, having left the security of the Rainforth grounds behind her, having also traversed a few yards of the highway, came to the entrance of the Hollow, as the lane was called. An awful place it had seemed to her last night; but at this hour, under these circumstances, it was altogether fearful.

But she had no idea of shrinking from this route. There was no possibility of choosing her road on this errand on which she was bent. Would she yet be in time? That was all she asked herself. Yet how terrible was the lull in the rage of the elements as she plunged into the blackness of the Hollow.

No gleam of light penetrated here; it was well that the steep bank she touched from time to time guided her in the right path; well, too, that Jimmy Hall had brought her here last night; otherwise she might have stumbled amid a knot of roots cropping up around an old tree which grew on one side in the Hollow, and that would have caused some delay—delay which might have been destruction.

Hilda had got half-way down the Hollow, when a sudden noise made her come to a momentary halt. Was any one there? She shuddered. This lull in the storm was, to her, more fearful than the thunder-crash. She listened with strained ears. Was any one there besides herself? Some one who would surely question her on such a night—in such a place?

One minute she paused lest her footsteps should be heard, and in that moment the deep roar of the thunder muttered from afar. She would rush onward at all hazards when the crash came. Who could distinguish her footsteps in the roar overhead?

But something else was to happen ere the crash broke overhead. The blinding glare of the lightning penetrated into the thick shade of the Hollow, changing its gloom for some seconds into a lurid day.

Hilda, crouching against the bank, could see not only the whole outline of the objects before her, but almost the minutest details.

What did she see in that startling moment, in which night changed for a few brief seconds into day, revealing a dark secret?

She saw a man and a woman not six paces

from her. They stood under the old tree she had tried to avoid, lest the knotted roots might throw her down.

Hilda only caught their features in profile; but that view was enough.

The man was the Honorable Charles Rainforth; the woman was that unknown stranger whom she had first seen in the night lurking near Rainforth House; whom she had certainly distinguished yesterday evening hiding by the clump of furze; whom the detective officers had suspected of the jewel robbery.

Did Lord Rainforth's heir consort with such as she?

Had they seen her? No; Hilda felt saved from that. The blinding lightning had shown them to her, but she had not been perceived by them. Nor must they hear her. She must creep away.

In that instant of hesitation the roar of the thunder passed, and another fearful lull succeeded.

Hilda, with sickening dread, remained rooted to the spot. In that momentary pause a voice reached her ears—the voice of the man, Charles Rainforth.

"Shall we give it up for to-night? In a storm like this we might both find our death under this tree."

"Pshaw! let's hope not. I know where I buried it. The casket is not so bulky, after all."

The casket! What casket? Were Lady Emily's diamonds in it?

Hilda shuddered at the conclusion forced upon her, and, spellbound, remained stationary for another brief moment.

That moment decided the fate of the man and the woman by the tree—that moment wafted other words to Hilda's ear through the darkness.

"Oh, Lottie," said the man, imploringly, "we may both be struck where we stand! To-morrow, at this time, we will return; not now!"

The woman laughed somewhat scornfully.

"I have no particular wish to die by lightning, it is true," said she.

"Come away, then!" he rejoined, in an awe-struck tone.

Then once more the voice of the storm made itself heard, and, under cover of the clash and din, Hilda fled forward.

She knew that Charles Rainforth and the woman must be behind her; but she flew on on the wings of fear—fear the most agonized—lest the few moments she had delayed in the lane might prove fatal.

Were that man and woman pursuing her? Had the latest flash of the lightning revealed her to them, as before she had discovered their proximity?

She could not tell. She only sped on from out the lane on to the high road, past the cottage of Poor Tommy Tutt; on still a few hundred feet, and there before her rose Wildflower Villa, a small, unpretending cottage residence not far from the roadside.

More than once she had been here with her pupils, and that lately, for Lord Rainforth had been having some repairs done to the cottage, and the children liked to gather some of the wild roses running to waste in the garden, since the incoming tenant was not to take possession till September.

The agony of a life seemed concentrated into that moment when Hilda pushed open the gate which gave ingress to the small garden surrounding the villa.

It yielded, and she made for the door, but that was secure. All was silent; at least, there was nothing distinguishable save the muttering of the thunder, the roar of the night-wind.

Hilda fled round to the side of the house, whence a glass door yielded to her touch, and she found herself inside the house, which at that instant became illuminated by a flash of lightning.

It was this which disclosed to Hilda that she was in the passage which led to a small room

on the ground floor, and that the door of this room was open.

Open? Yes; and the momentary blaze had surely shown her, too, the preparations for the dreadful tragedy which she had come to prevent. In the bare apartment stood a small, battered table and a single chair, and on that lay a desk, whereon was a pistol. It was this weapon she had distinguished by the lightning's glare.

But Sydney—where was he?

Gliding forward, she approached the little room, while her cold and trembling fingers felt for the taper and the matches which she had brought with her.

The feeble light diffused itself around! Was Sydney here? No; but earlier in the evening he must have been here—nay, very recently; for two letters lay on the rickety table, one addressed to Lord Rainforth, one to herself.

But the deadly weapon which rested there attracted her chief attention. She seized it, and hurled it into the storm without. It fell, with a dull thud, upon the soaking grass. Thank Heaven! she was in time. She had thrown away the thing by which a human life could be severed; her prayers—the aid she brought—should do the rest.

But as she sunk down, overwhelmed now that she believed the danger past, a new fear assailed her. Had Sydney completed what he had planned before her arrival? Would she find his body on the floor of the empty house? Had he, in some other manner, made his purpose sure?

With a cry, she started up, searching here and there, the storm still sounding without.

But the lifeless body of him she loved was not in that house, and overcome with thanksgiving, she sunk on her knees. Cold, drenched with the rain, shaking with extreme agitation, she yet gave infinite thanks. Sydney was saved. Five minutes went by like this during which Hilda lay half unconscious on the floor. Then she roused herself by an effort, for she had yet something to do. Dragging her trembling limbs to the room she had first entered, she placed on the desk, in lieu of the pistol, the bank-notes given her by poor old Tutt. How she blessed him in this hour for his kind bequest!

Oh, blessed thought! Instead of the fatal weapon with which he would have ended his life, Sydney would find means of prolonging it. The precious gift of the poor, despised crossing-sweeper would more than replace the thousand pounds, the loss of which Sydney had taken so much to heart! Would not the sight of the money sweep away his despair, give back to him the easy happiness he once possessed? Oh! whether or no she was to share that happiness she must rejoice, for he was saved, surely! Sydney was saved!

Now she had done all she could. There was nothing more for her to do but to watch and wait.

Oh, that Sydney might come soon!

Through the deep stillness, for the roar of wind and thunder was dying away, Hilda, with straining ear, caught a sound which was not the voice of the storm. No, it was the cautious opening of a door—the door by which she had entered herself; then a footstep came stealthily along the narrow passage.

Was it his—Sydney's? Was this the way they were to meet again?

The taper she had lighted cast but a feeble ray upon the table, on which lay the bank-notes, spread out to meet his view—to say to him, in mute but eloquent fashion, "You are rescued!"

Hilda had risen to her feet, pale as any snowdrop, her eyes appealing and full of tears.

Nearer and nearer came the self-doomed man. His face, too, was like marble—his hopes in this world were over. Did no light dawn upon him at that crisis that he was yielding to fate instead of conquering it?—that this was not a deed for such as he, despite the load which had crushed him?

Perchance, for his step faltered; but still he came on to do that deed which should rid him of the life which was too hard to live in unmerited disgrace.

"It will be ended in a moment. Death is better than torture!"

Such was the sentence on his lips as he turned into the little room which he had designed to be his place of doom. Then he uttered a sharp cry, and staggered forward. For what did he see before him? In place of the weapon which was to take away his life were scattered bank-notes, a light was burning, and she to whom he believed he had said an eternal adieu was waiting there to greet him!

"Sydney!" she cried, and put out her hands, and could say no more, but fell forward into the arms which he clasped around her.

CHAPTER IX.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S JOURNEY.

IN one moment the bitter thoughts with which Sydney Fraser had come there were swept away as if by enchantment. Hilda was the angel who restored to him the wish for life, the courage to battle with its difficulties.

"Oh, live—live for me, Sydney!" she sobbed, clinging to him.

Even now she trembled lest he should break from her, and go to find the deadly pistol.

"My angel!" he answered her; "how could I have been mad enough to think of aught else? Hilda, you are my angel, for you have saved me! How did you find the way to do so? How did you guess my rash, my wicked resolve, prompted by despair?"

"You gave me," she whispered, "the envelope intended for Charles Rainforth. It was a providence!"

"Heavens! but what a merciful mistake!"

Yes; he could say so now from his heart, so great a revulsion of feeling had he experienced in this short space of time. He shuddered in this moment at that which erewhile he had planned in desperate resolution.

They stood together, clasping each other's hands, like two children rescued from the edge of a precipice. Neither could yet think or speak connectedly; they only uttered broken sentences—he deeply penitent, she as immeasurably thankful.

Neither of them took count of time, or knew how the minutes passed. Each remembered only the great deliverance effected—remembered it with infinite gratitude. He was here—here beside her he loved! instead of—he could not finish the thought involved, nor could she.

And, as they thus stood, the Present swept away in unspeakable thankfulness, minutes passed, and those two knew not that they had gone.

By-and-by Hilda looked up, whispering, "Dearest, what was that?"

What? It was the chiming of the church clock, telling that it was two o'clock in the morning. And she was here! Above all things, she must return to Rainforth House before the summer dawn appeared.

"Sydney, I must go; and you have told me nothing, and I will never ask to know it, if you would rather bury the past. Only give me a sacred promise for the future that you will never dream again, however sharp the stress of misfortune, of ending it in *that* way."

He fell on his knees beside her, solemnly giving her the assurance she sought.

"There is an old well, long disused, at the end of the garden here; I will throw that pistol into it before I go, Hilda. Then, at any rate, it can never do for man or woman what I meant it to do for me."

And so she followed him into the garden (with what deep thanksgiving!), and together they sought the weapon, consigning it to its fate in the well.

"Oh, my own love!" cried Sydney, passionately, as they stood side by side; "have you understood the real cause of my despair? Loss of fortune alone would never have so moved

me; it was the dread of disgrace! From that *you* have saved me!"

"Disgrace?" she breathed, softly, and gazing on him wonderingly.

"Listen, my dearest," returned he; "and comprehend, if you can, what seems to me incomprehensible. A few hours before I became aware of the loss of all my hopes of fortune, Charles Rainforth had asked me, in presence of several men he knew, to take possession of bank-notes to the value of a thousand pounds—just for one night—only till the banks opened next day, he said. I was going to refuse, but he urged me. He said he was off to play billiards, and the money was not his—that it would be safer with me. I knew, in fact, that it belonged to a widow lady of scanty means, who is nearly the only person in the world who still believes Charles Rainforth an honorable man; she had intrusted this sum to him to invest—this same thousand pounds which he persuaded me to take charge of. He alone knew where I placed it; but, Hilda, when he came to me to ask me to give it again into his hands, the money was gone. Then he upbraided me with having secreted it for my own use; declared he would expose me; insisted that he had witnesses who would testify that I had received this large sum. And I—I could not refund it, so I resolved to die."

A tremor ran through Hilda's frame, and at sight of her emotion, Sydney restrained his own.

"See, my darling," he said; "what a change has come over the sky! The clouds are rolling away; the stars are shining out; the storm is over. May it typify our fortunes!"

She placed her hand in his without speaking, and thus they began the return to Rainforth House.

"We must pass down the Hollow; it will save twenty minutes of precious time," said Sydney.

At the mention of that place, the scene she had witnessed so lately there rushed back upon her memory, and not till then, so completely had it been obliterated by the engrossing thought of Sydney's danger and his deliverance.

"The Hollow!" she exclaimed, shrinking back. "Oh, Sydney, I believe that *there* the missing jewels are concealed!"

"Impossible! What makes you say so, dearest?"

And then she whispered to him the incident which had occurred to her on her way to Wild-flower Villa.

"Heavens!" cried Sydney; "could Charles Rainforth do this mean thing also? Oh, that I could confront him with the proof; then I might wring from him the confession of a secret which I suspect, but cannot bring to light!"

"Let us at least try, Sydney. To-morrow—to-morrow they are to seek the stolen jewels. We know the hour. Oh, let us watch!" cried Hilda.

In hasty communing, as they walked on, Sydney told Hilda his plans.

"Did you see the woman with Charles Rainforth?" asked he, as they drew near their destination.

"She was the same I saw in the grounds the night I went out to seek Bijou, and he called her Lottie," replied Hilda.

"Lottie?" said he, with a strange, incredulous, startled inquiry in his tone.

"Yes—Lottie. Do you guess who she can be, Sydney?"

"It is impossible! It is a wild conjecture! No, no; it cannot be that Lottie!" he answered.

"What Lottie? Who was she, Sydney?"

"My darling, she was—she is—some one who is never mentioned now."

He was embarrassed, and she did not like to add, "And I may not ask to know?"

In silence, he holding her hand tenderly, they threaded the path through the Hollow; a silence which to both of them was very blissful, for each was assured of the other's affec-

tion. Doubt, uncertainty were buried; they were lovers now who trusted each other.

And so, in these first joyful moments after Sydney's restoration to her, of his own restoration from despair, these two forgot that their path was weighted with trouble, with difficulties which threatened to overwhelm them.

Sydney was penniless—his hopes of an inheritance were over. Hilda, too, was in the same position, since Tommy Tutt's bequest was to be appropriated to clear Sydney's name from the breath of suspicion. If they wedded each other they would be in much the same position as the strolling Gipsy whom one meets on the highway; with this difference—that neither Sydney nor Hilda had the Gipsy's abilities for roughing it, or for gaining a livelihood in Gipsy fashion. Inexperienced and helpless, they saw happiness in brightest colors in the distance, and were sanguine enough to dream of leaping over the gulf which divided them from it.

They whispered to each other all the way their tender hopes for the future, till the great pile of Rainforth House rose close before them.

Everything depended on Hilda securing an entrance unobserved, so they ceased their whispers of affection as they turned into the grounds, and trod softly on the grass, still wet with the heavy summer rain, keeping as much as possible in the shelter of trees and bushes, for it was by no means dark.

Is it ever quite dark on a midsummer night when there are no clouds to obscure the sky? And those piled up by the late storm had entirely disappeared.

They rounded the corner of the house. Sydney pressed Hilda's hand in token of adieu, for now was the critical moment. If she found the doors leading to the veranda still unfastened, she was saved.

There lay the way before her. She disengaged her hand from Sydney's clasp and went forward; he remaining against the wall of the house at a little distance, to watch her entrance.

But he watched in vain. Hilda advanced—then as quickly recoiled, creeping into the shadow of the wall. What had she encountered to drive her back?

He peered before him, and could distinguish two figures, those of a man and a woman, planted on the very steps by which she would have ascended to regain her room.

Hark! They were whispering, or rather speaking in low tones that none but a person so close as Hilda was could have overheard. But her light and cautious footfall had not given warning of her approach, and the pair reclining at the foot of the stairway went on without interruption.

"I wish now that I had not given in to you, Charlie. It would have been everything to have got that casket to-night."

"I have a horror of being under trees in a great storm. I am not like you, Lottie—fearless!" returned the man.

Even in the dim light, which showed merely the outline of the figures, who had their backs toward her, it seemed to Hilda that the woman was of middle age, whereas she knew Charles Rainforth to be still young. They were a strangely assorted pair.

"I left fear behind me one day that I shall never forget!" she rejoined, defiantly, with a slight and smothered laugh, not pleasant to listen to. "Other people have something to be afraid of, but not I!"

"Oh, Lottie, I wish that had never been!" answered Charles Rainforth.

"I got rid of my chains, anyhow," replied she, in a discordant whisper. "And here I am revisiting the dear old haunts. Shall I come up to the house, Charlie, and ask one of the servants to show me over it? There is no one of the present lot who would remember me, I suppose?"

"Are you mad, Lottie? Of course you would be remembered. And why do you linger here now? Another half-hour, and objects about the place will be discernible."

"I stay here because I want to have a look at the gardens and grounds once more! As to being recognized, there is no fear of that. The gardeners will not come to work before six o'clock at earliest, and my lord and my lady are in London. Shall I go and call upon them there, Charlie?"

"Lottie, sometimes you make me shudder!" said he.

"Charlie, sometimes my own fate makes me despair!" she answered. "Shut out from all that was once mine—banished, outlawed!"

"Well, you know, you should have considered that beforehand," he answered, coldly.

His tone roused all the fierceness in her nature.

"No!" she hissed; "they should have considered long before for me. My lady should have taught me what were true and what were worthless things. It has been rather hard for me to find out for myself in the manner that I have done."

"And may I ask if you are pursuing the things worth having just now?" sneered Charles Rainforth. "Do you intend, also, to sit here much longer? Because if you do, I do not. I should certainly be recognized, which would surprise people who suppose me to be some miles away. We meet at the usual rendezvous to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes," she replied, sullenly; "and if you are not there I shall do the work alone, storm or no storm!"

"And if you do not appear, I shall proceed to business alone," he rejoined. "Let me give you one word of caution, Lottie. My lord firmly believes you to be on the other side of the globe; if he once discovered that you were here—"

"He would stop my allowance, I suppose!" sneered she. "Well, I suppose he would; but then he will not know that I am here unless you tell him, and I hardly believe you will do that, for you could never have carried out his business without me, Charlie."

"Hush!" returned he. "Do not be so reckless, Lottie. My father easily suspects, and he did suspect the truth when you so rashly loitered in the gardens on that night when Miss Seaford came upon you so unexpectedly. Considering what you and I had planned, it was madness to allow yourself to be seen by any one!"

"I don't want your lecturing, Charlie. How could I suppose that the governess would go into the garden at that hour after the children's dog? One must risk something, as you yourself said, when one is planning a transaction which will realize several thousand pounds!"

The woman paused, laughing below her breath discordantly.

"Well, do go away now, Lottie," resumed Charles Rainforth. "There are still dangers enough to encounter. I have got my leave of absence, and will join you in Belgium in thirty-six hours after we have unearthed Emmy's gewgaws."

"There is at least no danger that his lordship will suspect my presence," laughed Lottie. "Since he received that letter, written months ago and confided to a friend of mine to post in India, in India he confidently supposes me to be. Thus, after every effort to stop inquiry as to who the unknown woman loitering at dead of night in his grounds could be, he flung away suspicion on receipt of the letter from India, as we had proof when he set the police at work after the diamonds had disappeared."

"That being so, it is all the more important that his suspicions should not be renewed, Lottie."

"What good can they be to him? He will receive the usual quarterly letter in due time—(that I can answer for, for I left it ready written and dated when I sailed from India). We have got a haul of about three thousand pounds a-piece, Charlie; it was a daring scheme, brilliantly carried out (chiefly by the despised Lottie), and so let us be contented, and not quarrel."

"Very well! But you will be questioned by the gardeners if you stay here much longer," he said, suddenly.

"How often have I run down these steps!" continued Lottie, coolly disregarding his warning. "Oh, Charlie! now that I find myself in the old place again, after thinking that I never could come back, I feel as if I must be here by night, if not by day! Charlie, I must come and live in England once more!"

"For what end?" asked he, in a hard voice. "Would it cheer you to meet disgrace—to invite contumely? You can but be aware that society does not easily forget. It never will forget in your case!"

She rose suddenly, as if his words had stung her to the quick.

"In Brussels, then," she said, "after—the Hollow. Shall we meet at one o'clock, or earlier?"

"Half-past twelve. The rustics will all be in bed at that hour," answered Charles Rainforth.

Sydney had long ere this glided behind a bush; while Hilda had remained motionless, scarcely hidden by the wall and by a garden-seat.

It was due to the sheltering gloom, the absorption of the speakers in their whispered dialogue, and to Hilda's perfect stillness, that they did not discover her presence.

No; though dreadfully chilled, though the rain had drenched, and excitement had shaken her, she controlled every movement.

It was an indescribable relief to her when she beheld the pair, who had barred her return to the house, separate at last; the woman glancing more than once at the upper windows of the mansion, the man slinking away into the park.

More dead than alive, Hilda climbed the stairs, pushed open the doors; and, almost without power to secure them, fell unconscious on her bed.

CHAPTER X. IN THE HOLLOW.

THE light of a brilliant morning has succeeded the terrible storm of last night; the Rainforth grounds have never looked more sparklingly beautiful than they do as the sun rises over them. The roses hold up their drenched heads; the birds carol out loudly their joy at the returning day. The flower-garden, in which the gardeners are busy, and where numerous butterflies are hovering over the gay-tinted blossoms, looks far too peaceful a place for such a scene as had been enacted in it ere daylight had returned.

Miss Seaford is not well to-day. She lies shivering up stairs, and has asked Maria to bring her some tea.

"It's the storm has upset you, miss," says Maria. "I never heard such thunder. Mrs. Jones and me were awake well-nigh all night. No wonder it upsets you, miss, out here away from everybody."

So Hilda's inability to rise is attributed to the storm. But as she lies helpless upon her couch, her head is full of thankfulness, full of joy. Sydney is saved—Sydney loves her!

Other thoughts arise later. Who is the mysterious woman whom Charles Rainforth evidently is in league with, and whom he calls "Lottie?" Hilda recoils from the dreadful conclusion that it is they who have stolen the jewels.

She has had no cause to love the Rainforths; but she feels deeply for them now, and already experiences the peace, the rest of being able to lean upon Sydney.

He had told her to "leave to him the task of seeing justice done, while sparing the Rainforths, if that could be." He had written the same to her this morning, and right glad is she to trust to him the issue of this terrible affair.

How the jewels are to be restored to their owner without Charles Rainforth's real character being exposed, Hilda cannot imagine; but she has unbounded trust in Sydney's resources.

It is well that he can act for her at this

juncture; for she is prostrate now, and cannot even rise and creep into the sunlight. The great strain on her nerves, the long excitement, the exposure to the elements, the fearful discovery she had made in the Hollow, the sudden reappearance of the mysterious woman with Charles Rainforth at the foot of the staircase leading to the veranda—all this combined had been too much for her to bear, especially as all this had come immediately after the half-expressed avowal of Sydney's love and his declaration that theirs must be a final adieu.

What was the storm of the elements compared to that which had torn her young heart? And she sunk down under the conflict when the call for immediate effort was over.

And where was Sydney Fraser? The rescued man was now himself once more—full of remorse for the weakness which had made him yield to despair when threatened with disgrace—full of gratitude to Hilda.

But he had much to do to-day; so much that he must not pause to think of love till he had obeyed duty. Following the dictates of the latter he did what he had not thought to do again—namely, he presented himself at Lord Rainforth's town house. That nobleman had just come in from driving, and the last person he had expected to be troubled with was his discarded ward, Sydney Fraser.

"Tell Mr. Fraser I am far too much engaged to see him to-night," replied he, haughtily, to the servant who took in Sydney's message.

"Yes, my lord."

But Sydney had followed the servant, and now stood within the room.

Something in the young man's aspect checked the anger about to burst from his lordship's lips, and he allowed the door to close without a word.

"My lord," began Sydney, "I am as unwilling to find myself here as you can be to see me under your roof, and only a strong motive—the very strongest—could bring me to your house after what has passed between us."

"So I suppose," interrupted Lord Rainforth, haughtily. "I will, however, ask you to be brief."

"So be it," returned Sydney, coldly. "This, then, is my business with your lordship. Will you undertake to journey to Rainforth this evening in my company, in order, as I believe, to aid me to recover the jewels stolen from Rainforth House? If you say yes, I will attempt to conceal what I know would be most painful to your lordship to have disclosed. If you refuse, I shall at once travel down with a couple of police-officers from Scotland Yard. It is for your lordship to decide."

Saying which, Sydney retired a step, and quietly awaited an answer.

Lord Rainforth was astonished, and felt uneasy.

"What can there be to conceal, or that I should wish concealed, in this matter of stolen diamonds?" cried he. "They were taken from under my roof; I am, therefore, doubly anxious that they should be restored to my niece. There can be no cause why I should wish for concealment."

"Your lordship is mistaken; but it is for your decision," repeated Sydney.

"You are singularly mysterious, Fraser," said his lordship, irritably. "Why cannot you speak out?"

"The matter is too grave, and our altered relations likewise forbid it, my lord," replied Sydney; "but I must beg you to give me your answer at once."

"Well, I will go, then," said Lord Rainforth, angrily. "But I do not think you justified in making your communication so secretly. It is always best to speak out."

"In this case your lordship will hardly say so," answered the young man; "and since you have decided to accompany me instead of letting a detective take your place, you must be ready to leave in an hour, and be prepared to watch till past midnight."

"A comfortable prospect, truly!" ejaculated Lord Rainforth, scornfully.

By eight o'clock the nobleman and his late ward were driving together toward a railway station, they who a short time since had parted expecting never again to cross each other's path.

During the journey to Rainforth, Sydney was silent, speaking only when addressed by the man whom till so lately he had termed "uncle."

By half-past ten both were deposited within a mile of that gloomy lane which Hilda had traversed when called to see poor Tommy Tutt.

When Lord Rainforth and his companion were clear of the station, Sydney addressed the former.

"Our destination is the Hollow," said he. "At half-past twelve a man and a woman will appear to remove the diamonds, which they have concealed there. Perfect silence on our side is all that will be needed for the discovery, and nothing easier than to conceal ourselves near the old tree, in or near which Lady Emily's jewels lie buried."

"How do you know this? Watch! I would watch all night to restore those jewels to my niece; but a detective was wanted here."

"No; secrecy, silence, but not the presence of any stranger!" said Sydney, in an undertone.

They moved on, Lord Rainforth vaguely uneasy. The night was calm, a great and agreeable contrast to the wild storm of yesterday.

"After we enter the Hollow there must be no further word exchanged between us, my lord. We come here to recover the diamonds, and must do so."

"Very well," answered his lordship, gloomily.

Eleven o'clock was striking as they reached their destination.

"I will indicate by a sign the place where we must lie hidden," Sydney had whispered ere they entered the dark pathway.

They were quickly at their post of observation. Long boughs swept down over the bank opposite to the old tree, whose leafy branches, crossing and recrossing a clump of giant bracken, made a convenient place of concealment. Gliding rather than walking down the Hollow, Lord Rainforth and Sydney crept among the bracken; after which there was nothing left for them to do but to watch and wait.

It was a dreary vigil, and seemed as though it would never end.

Of what was it to be the precursor? Lord Rainforth asked himself, with increasing uneasiness, as he stood in the deep and gloomy Hollow.

Half-past eleven struck. The church clock was not distant; they would have no difficulty in telling the hour. At first the noise of a rabbit stirring in the wood behind them, a squirrel darting up a branch, broke the profound quiet; but toward midnight a deep silence pervaded the place where they were. Even the nightingales were not singing, or had carried their song elsewhere.

* * * * *

"I tell you what it is, Lottie; I shall be glad when the next week is over, especially the next few hours," whispered Charles Rainforth to his accomplice, as he and she set out that summer night to complete their dark deed.

Lottie only laughed.

"I wish I could laugh!" said the wretched man, who had a coward feeling for himself.

"I? I can do most things!" replied Lottie, in a hard whisper.

After this they were silent till they neared the lane. Then Charles Rainforth spoke again.

"Lottie,"—in a hushed and shuddering tone—"you will know what to do if—if any one comes down the Hollow?"

"No one will come down the Hollow. Don't be such a coward!" sneered she. "It is left to you and me to wander about on such errands as we are bent on to-night."

"But, still, if any one *did* pass by the tree?" persisted he.

"Why, then they should see a decent peasant woman on her way from the village of Wilby to visit a sick friend at Rainforth. My disguise is perfect, and my story clear; be under no fear on my account."

"We must not appear to know each other, Lottie."

"Of course not. I shall merely ask you my road. Ah, me!" continued the woman, with a weary sigh; "I could almost wish I had never known my way about Rainforth—that I had never been born!"

"It is no use talking like that, Lottie."

"Hush! here we are! Now for it!" she rejoined. "Give me the lantern!"

Then they passed on into the Hollow.

Charles Rainforth went first, the woman following.

Though it was all but quite dark under the overhanging boughs, the latter appeared to know the spot even better than the former; for it was she who laid her hand silently on his arm in the obscurity to indicate that they must come to a halt in this place.

Both paused, both listened for some seconds to assure themselves that no one was passing through the Hollow.

But no footstep sounded on the pathway. Surely the people of the hamlet slept securely, and who but they would pass here?

Even Charles Rainforth felt that he could do his work of unearthing the jewels, without danger of being disturbed.

When the pursuit was hottest, the casket containing Lady Emily's diamonds had lain here, defying the united skill of the officials in Scotland Yard to discover them.

Yet the heir of Rainforth had been struck with a dread of being observed to-night by some of the village people; but, now that the hour was come, something eclipsed the dread—the thought that the proceeds of the robbery would in great part free him from the embarrassments which reckless play and dissipation had brought him. There was also a sudden sense of security in the deep quiet and in the lateness of the hour.

Much the same feeling was in Lottie's mind—that is, the kind of triumph at their successful robbery, the disbelief in the chance of discovery at that hour, and in that place. But neither of them spoke. Long ago they had agreed what each should do in the critical moment.

The other two watchers among the fern could catch the clink of a spade against the earth, even before any gleam from the lantern just lighted by Lottie was distinguishable.

It was not needed to see to be satisfied that somebody was digging for the treasure—the buried casket!

As yet, Lord Rainforth had no idea who was the man who had stolen Lady Emily's jewels, for he could discern nothing from his biding-place, nor had Charles Rainforth and the woman exchanged a remark since they gained the interior of the Hollow.

Thus he was unprepared for what was to follow.

Throwing out a few spadefuls of earth was not a long business, for the ground was still moist and soft with yesterday's downpour, so that when a huge turf (which had been displaced) had been removed, the hidden casket was disclosed. Not, however, to the watchers amid the fern—they could see nothing; but well enough they inferred that the cessation of digging meant that the prize was laid bare.

As had been agreed previously between them, Sydney now laid his hand on Lord Rainforth's arm, and both crept out from their shelter as cautiously as possible, though both knew that the hour for watching was over, that the moment for action had arrived.

Their aim now was to seize the casket from the very hands of the robber.

Without attracting the attention of the culprits, Lord Rainforth and Sydney got with-

out their ferny shelter, clear of the overhanging boughs, and for one brief moment stood gazing on the scene before them. What they beheld were the stooping forms of a man and a woman, the latter holding a lantern, which just made visible the patch on which they stood.

Near them lay a spade, thrown hastily aside; behind them rose the steep bank, all covered with tangled creepers; before them the huge tree at whose foot they had concealed the casket.

There was not much light from the lantern, but it played on the stern, pale face of the woman, and showed a countenance which belonged not to a simple peasant.

Her companion was leaning toward the ground, his back toward the watchers. He was in the very act of raising that stolen treasure, when he was startled by a hoarse low cry quite near him.

In an agony of fear, Charles Rainforth dropped the casket on the earth, and turned round, thus confronting closely his own father.

At the same moment Lord Rainforth's involuntary cry was echoed by another, which broke faintly from the lips of the startled woman.

It was at her, rather than at his own son, that Lord Rainforth gazed; toward her that he stretched out a repellent hand, while she recoiled as he gasped out the words, "You, Lottie!"

In an instant Sydney Fraser had snatched the casket from the spot where Charles Rainforth had dropped it.

"It is for you to answer me a few questions now," said he, sternly.

The wretched man, crushed by the unexpected exposure, was abject and helpless.

"Yes, yes; you shall be satisfied," he said; "but let us go away from here. The police will be upon us. I shall be discovered—disgraced! Remember,"—wringing his hands—"I am known to every villager; Lottie is forgotten!"

"Would that she were in her grave!" burst from the lips of the wretched Lord Rainforth. Then turning fiercely to the woman, "So you were not content with the measure of disgrace you had brought on your family and on their old name! It was not enough that you deceived your husband—you, my eldest daughter, married to a peer of the realm; not enough that you fled from him to a worthless lover—that you subjected your family to the degradation of hearing your subsequent divorce discussed in every newspaper!"

"Father, have a little pity!" murmured she.

"Pity! Have you had any for me, for your mother, for your young brothers and sisters? Henceforth do as you can; for you have simulated repentance only to deceive me more bitterly. I believed you to be in India, and I find you here at my own doors, engaged in dragging your already weak and erring brother into a crime. I may be pardoned for wishing the grave hid you from my sight."

"You never mean that you will abandon me, father?" cried the wretched woman—she who was by birth the Honorable Charlotte Rainforth, who had achieved what is termed "a brilliant marriage," and who had made her debut in society with great effect ten years ago.

Since that time she had vanished from the world; her name had been never mentioned in her own home; only in her utter need Lord Rainforth (at his wife's entreaty) had forwarded her fifty pounds once a quarter. Virtually she was dead, and her father looked on her now for the first time since that distressing day when her name had been mentioned with reproach in the public newspapers.

And this was the manner in which he now found her!—engaged in completing a robbery! Was it to be wondered at that he turned sternly from her appeal?

"I will abandon you!" he answered. "You could not do worse!"

It was then that she raised her head defiantly.

"Well, be it so; but I still have a brother. You, Charles," she cried, wildly, *you* will never cast me off!"

Up to this time the miserable man had remained cowering, his face hidden by his arm, which rested on the old tree-trunk. But now he looked up, with a white and scared visage.

"It is you who led me to this—you ought to have refused to help me in it! I have done with you!" he cried.

"Is it *you* who say that? You, Charles? But you do not mean it! You and I always sympathized with each other."

"I do not feel for you now, I can tell you!" he whimpered. "I have enough to do to think of myself! Loaded with debt, and no means now of paying my liabilities, what means have I of helping you? Besides, it is better for us to part. You are only a disgrace to the family!"

"And what are *you*?" she shrieked, regardless of any chance listener. "A thief, a designing thief, and now a coward! Worse than that!—for I know that you have cheated Sydney Fraser of his inheritance. Where is the lost codicil? Can you answer *that*, Charles Rainforth?"

"I—I—how should I know anything of it? Do not accuse me falsely, Lottie, because you are angry," stammered he.

She answered by a scornful glance, turned her back on him, and went up to Sydney, addressing him in a low voice, "What will you give me for the lost codicil?—a sufficiency? Say five hundred a year for life, and it is yours; for I—I have the missing bit of paper. I thought it might be useful in an emergency, and so relieved my dear brother of its possession almost as soon as he allowed me to discover that he had secreted it. It is astonishing how short-sighted rogues can be!"

Fierce was the rage of Charles Rainforth. He darted forward, and but for his unhappy father's interference and Sydney's restraining hand, would have felled his sister to the ground.

Then Sydney Fraser, hitherto rather a spectator than an actor in this scene, raised his voice.

"Recollect that if I consent to save the name of Rainforth from further disgrace, I do so on certain conditions. Justice shall be done, or I call in the person who last night was a witness to your meeting in this place when the storm was at its height. She it was who overheard it all, from whose information it results that Lord Rainforth and myself are now here."

"What, Fraser! does any one beside yourself know that my son is a thief?" groaned the unhappy nobleman.

"Yes, my lord; but that person is a lady who is about to become my wife. She will keep silence for my sake. But I spoke of conditions. The jewels I will myself restore to Lady Emily, explaining only that you had received information which led you to suppose they were concealed in this spot, and that after a long vigil our search was rewarded; so that we shall easily dispose of that matter. The second is, that justice shall be done to myself. The lost codicil must be produced. Thirdly, Mr. Rainforth must immediately retire from the army and from the country. It would not be proper to others to allow him to retain an honorable post either in her Majesty's service or in the country."

"I will never see him again!" exclaimed the miserable Lord Rainforth. "I will grant him a few hundreds a-year; let him work and pay his debts, and never return to shame me and his mother."

"How am I to clear off my heavy liabilities?" whined Charles.

"Sell your commission and pay your debts with that, you worthless son!" said Lord Rainforth, turning fiercely on him.

"And this is your doing, Lottie!" said Charles, grinding his teeth with rage.

"I'm sorry you are a coward!" sneered she, in reply.

"Let us finish this; it will be best and safest," interposed Sydney. Then, addressing Lottie, "I agree to your terms; that is if, on production of the codicil, I find myself in possession of an adequate independence."

"Adequate!" said she. "That is hardly the fitting word. You will have over fifteen thousand a year. Money accumulates as well as dust, when 't is not dissipated."

"Fifteen thousand!" ejaculated Sydney, thinking of Hilda—Hilda, who had rescued him from despair and death, to whom it was mainly owing that good fortune had come to him at last.

"Accumulations, you know," remarked Lottie, coolly. "I wish I stood in your shoes! However, what is the use of riches to a woman who is shut out of society? I can live in idleness, I can travel a little, and forget myself on five hundred a year. Secure that to me, and the codicil shall be in your hands to-morrow."

"It is yours!" answered Sydney.

She drew a breath of relief.

"Ah, I have been so crippled on my pittance of two hundred! I took the codicil, thinking to wring something out of Charles; but he may thank himself that I am making terms with you instead. I had better meet you to-morrow. Good by, father! You can bear to say good-by, I suppose?"

But Lord Rainforth turned from her, and, drawing Sydney aside, conjured him to be silent.

"This will send me to my grave!" concluded he.

"I hope not, my lord. Shall we travel to town together? The first thing we have to do is to deposit Lady Emily's jewels at her banker's, and to apprise her that they are recovered; and then my own business must be arranged."

"Pray do not let Lottie's name appear again before the public! It is believed by her former acquaintances that she never recovered from an attack of cholera in India."

"I will do all I can not to disturb that belief, my lord. Shall we leave this place now?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, it is a cruel thing to have a son and daughter who are a disgrace to us!" returned Lord Rainforth.

To this Sydney could give no answer; and soon after he, with his late guardian and the disguised Lottie, took the way for the station, there to wait till the earliest train should carry them to London. But Lottie's father spoke no word to her on the way; and as for Charles Rainforth, he had slunk off.

CHAPTER XI.

A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE.

"THERE, miss, I do believe when you get quite strong again, you'll be better than you used to be before this illness! It's a famous day for your first drive, and the air will soon bring you round."

"I am so glad to be able to get out once more," replied Hilda.

She has been very ill (from cold, the doctors say), and a whole month has elapsed since that night when she strained all her nerve, and not in vain, to save Sydney.

All this time she has been laid up, a prisoner at Rainforth House; all this time she has not seen Sydney. A great deal has happened since the betrothal night.

Lottie has disappeared, carrying with her a sum of money and a legal document securing to her the independence she demanded.

Charles Rainforth has also retired from the army; and, after a fierce quarrel with his father, has disappeared to some foreign gambling place, where he will live under an assumed name. It has been given out that he left the army on account of seriously impaired health, by which excuse his continued stay abroad is accounted for.

But let us return to Hilda, who is attiring

herself—or, rather, for she is still very weak—who is being attired—for her first drive after her illness. The Rainforths have been very civil to her; indeed, they have loaded her with attentions ever since they understood that she was to marry Sydney Fraser, that she it was who was cognizant of their son's baseness, and of their daughter's disgrace.

"I can't think why mamma has altered so to you, Miss Seaford," remarked Julia. "Nothing is good enough for you now. Is it true that you are going to marry our cousin Sydney, who is so rich? See, he has sent you these beautiful flowers! He sends you some every day—doesn't he?"

Hilda, reclining in the easy-chair in her dressing-room, says "Yes," with a vivid blush.

"And I know he writes to you every day too," continues Julia. "Why, you will be a sort of connection of curs when you are married. Dear me! How odd! Oh, Miss Seaford, I hope you won't remember how naughty we all were to you when you were our governess!"

Hilda readily promises.

The Rainforths and she can never be very intimate, but she compassionates them, and it was at Rainforth House that Sydney and she learned to love each other.

"The carriage is ready now, my dear Miss Seaford," says Lady Rainforth, appearing at the door. "I have ordered my own pony-carriage, as I know that will be easiest for you."

"How kind!" replies Hilda, thinking, however, that she would rather have some other companionship than that of the burly old coachman who will drive her, as she is far too weak to manage the ponies herself; nor has Lady Rainforth offered to drive them.

The July sunshine falls gayly across the gardens and the beds of flowers.

Hilda is delighted at this prospect of seeing the outside world again, and being wafted through the balmy air; but she is, secretly, a little depressed that Sydney says nothing of coming to see her.

His letters have certainly not been wanting in vows of love, but written words are not like hand-pressures; nor can they convey glances full of affection, nor give the rapture that comes from the presence of the loved one.

Sydney is full of business, she knows, business consequent on his recent accession to the property; but still she longs for a word from his own lips, to be assured that riches have not changed him.

She is, therefore, somewhat subdued as she goes feebly down the broad staircase.

The sun is blazing into the hall through one of the painted windows, which is the reason she does not see a gentleman standing at the foot of the stairs, whose features betray a strong emotion.

Lady Rainforth, who has accompanied Hilda, discreetly disappears by a side door; and the girl, looking up, sees one who is gazing on her with deep and reverent affection.

She utters a smothered exclamation of joy as Sydney springs forward and folds her in his arms.

Neither can speak very connectedly; both are rapturously glad.

"How I have counted the hours for this moment to arrive!" he breathes fondly. "And you—have you thought of me, dearest? Have you understood how hard every day of separation was to me?"

She murmured softly that he had been always in her thoughts.

"Keep me ever in your heart, dearest! So, only, can I know happiness!" he answered. "Oh, Hilda, can you, indeed, forgive me?"

She asked, with innocent wonder, what it was that she could have to pardon?

"My mad despair. My wicked resolution that night you came through the storm to rescue me. Hilda, can I ever forgive myself? I know now how wicked such an act would have been!"

"Let the past be the past, and together we will use the future!" she whispered.

He led her out into the July sunshine; and it was he who took his place by her side, instead of Lady Rainforth's coachman—he who piloted her among cool, refreshing byways, talking always of the future they would live together.

It was on this blissful occasion that Hilda first understood of how grand a mansion she was to be mistress.

Glendale—such was the name of the property to which Sydney had succeeded—was rich in picturesque beauty; in treasures of art collected fifty years ago by the eccentric old man who had allowed his grandson to remain in doubt for so many years as to whether wealth or poverty was to be his lot.

"Hilda, we will take warning by the unhappy Rainforths. We will never set this wealth that is to come to us above higher things; will we, my love?" said he, as the slanting sun warned them to turn the ponies' heads homeward.

"Oh, no, Sydney!" she answered, fervently. "Glendale itself shall be loved as chief of all."

"My darling!" he responded, taking her hand in his. "Oh, Hilda, you must tell me one thing more before we enter Rainforth House again. When will you come to Glendale?"

"To Glendale?" she faltered, with a beautiful flush.

"Could I go there without you?" he said.

This was a question to which Hilda found it difficult to reply, though she had known all along that it must be answered soon.

All that need be told more of these lovers, happy after such torturing conflicts, is that when the ponies clattered into the park at Rainforth, Sydney held the reins in one hand, while he clasped Hilda's readily yielded palm with the other.

There was sunshine for them at last.

Her look was full of gladness, full of trust, as she whispered, "It shall be as you wish, Sydney. We will go to live at Glendale very early in September."

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